

## Self-Esteem and Socio-Demographic Influences among Female Postgraduate Students from Scheduled Caste Communities

Dr. A. Sivagami<sup>1</sup>, S.Vimala<sup>2</sup>,

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, Bharathidasan University, Khajamalai Campus, Tiruchirappalli – 620 023, Tamil Nadu, India, Email : sivagami@bdu.ac.in

<sup>2</sup>Research Scholar, Department of Social Work, Bharathidasan University, Khajamalai Campus, Tiruchirappalli – 620 023, Tamil Nadu, India

### KEYWORDS

Scheduled Caste,  
Female  
Postgraduate  
Students, Self-  
Esteem, Socio-  
Demographic  
Factors,  
Education.

### ABSTRACT:

The study investigates the socio-demographic factors influencing self-esteem among Scheduled Caste female postgraduate students in Higher Education Institutions. With a sample of 260 respondents, the research examines the relationships between age, marital status, family structure, parental education, occupation, family income, place of residence, and educational background in relation to the self-esteem levels of the participants. The findings reveal that a significant majority (69.6 percent) of the students report low self-esteem, with various socio-economic factors, such as low family income, rural residence, and limited parental education, potentially contributing to these outcomes. Interestingly, while there is no statistically significant correlation between self-esteem and variables like age, family income, or family type, differences are observed in self-esteem based on the stream of education, with science students showing higher self-esteem than their arts counterparts. Additionally, the type of school attended during higher secondary education was found to have a minor influence on self-esteem. The study suggests the need for targeted interventions to improve self-esteem among SC female students, particularly in rural areas and from lower-income backgrounds. Further research could explore the psychological and social dynamics of self-esteem development in different educational and socio-economic contexts to deepen understanding and inform policy and educational practices.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Self-esteem is a vital psychological construct that shapes an individual's sense of worth, confidence, and ability to navigate life's challenges. It plays a significant role in determining how people perceive themselves and interact with the world around them. As a key determinant of personal and social development, self-esteem is influenced by a range of factors, including socio-cultural context, upbringing, and life experiences. Understanding the dynamics of self-esteem is crucial for fostering personal growth and resilience, particularly in environments where individuals face systemic or societal challenges. Education, as a transformative force, provides a unique setting to explore how self-esteem evolves and impacts students' aspirations, achievements, and interactions. Recognizing and addressing the factors that influence self-esteem is essential for promoting holistic development and well-being. For female students from Scheduled Caste communities, the development and sustenance of self-esteem are often shaped by the intersection of gender, caste, and socio-economic factors. Higher education institutions, as spaces of learning and empowerment, play a pivotal role in this process. However, systemic challenges, such as discrimination, economic constraints, and societal prejudices, can create barriers that impact their self-perception and academic experiences. Understanding the dynamics of self-esteem among SC female students in higher education is essential for fostering an inclusive and equitable academic environment that supports their personal and professional aspirations.

### **1.1. Review of Literature**

The reviewed literature collectively highlights the intricate dynamics of self-esteem among female Scheduled Caste (SC) students in higher education, focusing on various factors like socio-economic status, perceived discrimination, emotional intelligence, and family support. These studies share a common objective: to assess the self-esteem levels of marginalized groups, especially SC females, and explore the factors influencing their psychological well-being. Sampling methods varied across studies, including both qualitative and quantitative approaches, with sample sizes ranging from small focus groups to larger surveys conducted in urban and rural regions. A significant number of studies used stratified or random sampling to ensure representation across different caste and gender demographics. Despite methodological differences, the overarching goal remained consistent: understanding the challenges faced by SC female students in educational environments and identifying pathways for empowerment.

Similarities in findings reveal that SC female students often report lower self-esteem compared to their male counterparts or students from non-SC backgrounds. Perceived caste discrimination emerged as a recurring theme negatively impacting self-esteem, academic performance, and mental health. Studies like those by Kumar and Gupta (2017) and Sharma and Singh (2019) emphasized the correlation between perceived discrimination and diminished self-esteem. Additionally, the role of family support and socio-economic background was noted as critical in shaping self-esteem levels. Research by Patel (2021) highlighted the importance of targeted interventions to foster self-confidence and resilience among SC female students, mirroring insights from Tadavi and Sontakke (2022) that stressed the need for inclusive educational policies.

However, dissimilarities arise in the extent and nature of self-esteem disparities. While some studies, such as Ghosh (2013), found a pronounced gap between SC and non-SC students, others, like Mandal et al. (2023), noted instances where SC females exhibited comparable or higher self-esteem under supportive social structures. Furthermore, studies examining urban versus rural settings revealed nuanced variations, with urban SC females often enjoying better access to resources and higher self-esteem compared to their rural counterparts. These findings underscore the multidimensional nature of self-esteem among SC female students, shaped by an interplay of systemic barriers, individual resilience, and socio-cultural influences. By consolidating these insights, the literature underscores the urgency for holistic, equity-focused interventions in higher education.

### **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Self-esteem is a critical component of psychological well-being that influences an individual's confidence, resilience, and ability to achieve personal and academic goals. For female students belonging to Scheduled Caste (SC) communities in India, self-esteem is often impacted by the interplay of systemic discrimination, socio-economic disparities, and gender-based challenges. Despite constitutional provisions and affirmative action policies aimed at empowering marginalized groups, SC female students frequently encounter societal biases and institutional barriers in higher education. These challenges can adversely affect their self-esteem, academic performance, and overall well-being, potentially hindering their ability to fully benefit from educational opportunities. In the context of higher education institutions, where students are expected to develop critical thinking, leadership skills, and professional competence, low self-esteem can create significant barriers to success. Understanding the factors that influence the self-esteem of SC female students such as family background, peer interactions, faculty attitudes, and institutional support—es essential for addressing their unique needs and fostering an inclusive environment. This study aims to examine the self-esteem levels of SC female students in higher

education institutions, identify the factors contributing to their experiences, and suggest actionable interventions to promote their psychological well-being and academic success.

### **1.3 Scope of the Study**

This study focuses on assessing the self-esteem levels of female Scheduled Caste (SC) students in higher education institutions, with an emphasis on understanding the factors that influence their psychological well-being and academic performance. The research examines the interplay of socio-economic conditions, caste-based discrimination, gender biases, and institutional support in shaping their self-esteem. The scope extends to analyzing how family dynamics, peer relationships, and the educational environment impact their confidence and self-worth. By investigating these dimensions, the study seeks to provide insights into the challenges faced by SC female students and identify strategies for fostering an inclusive academic atmosphere. The findings will be relevant for policymakers, educational administrators, and social work practitioners, enabling the development of targeted interventions and support systems.

### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

This study holds significance for several reasons. First, it addresses a critical gap in understanding the psychological experiences of SC female students, a marginalized group often overlooked in discussions of equity and inclusion in education. By highlighting the factors that influence their self-esteem, the research contributes to the broader discourse on social justice and empowerment. Second, the findings will provide actionable insights for higher education institutions to design supportive programs and policies that enhance the self-esteem and academic success of SC female students. Finally, the study has implications for advancing the goals of affirmative action and social inclusion, as it emphasizes the importance of creating equitable opportunities for marginalized communities in education. By addressing the unique needs of SC female students, this research aims to promote their holistic development and contribute to their personal and professional growth.

## **2. METHODS AND MATERIALS**

The study employed a combination of purposive and random sampling techniques to select the respondents. At the first stage, women's colleges in Thanjavur District were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that the institutions chosen were aligned with the objectives of the study. These colleges were specifically chosen as they cater to a significant population of Scheduled Caste female students pursuing postgraduate education, providing a suitable context for the research. In the second stage, respondents were selected using random sampling to ensure that the selection process was unbiased and representative. The sample comprised 260 Scheduled Caste female students aged 20 to 25 years, who were enrolled in postgraduate programs in Government Colleges for Women in Thanjavur District. This age group was targeted as it represents a critical phase of young adulthood, where self-esteem and personal identity are significantly influenced by educational and social experiences. The selection of this sample size was guided by the need to achieve a balance between feasibility and the representation of the target population. By combining purposive and random sampling methods, the study ensured a focused yet unbiased approach to understanding the self-esteem levels of SC female postgraduate students. The data collected from this group aimed to provide insights into the socio-demographic characteristics, psychological well-being, and institutional challenges faced by the respondents.

### **2.1 Objectives of the Study**

- To analyze the socio-demographic profile of Scheduled Caste female students pursuing post-graduation and its influence on their self-esteem.
- To evaluate the self-esteem levels of Scheduled Caste female postgraduate students and identify the key factors contributing to their self-perception.

### 3. KEY FINDINGS

The table no.1 highlights that the respondents predominantly come from economically modest and educationally constrained backgrounds, often shaped by traditional and rural socio-economic settings.

**Table No. 1 - Distribution of the respondents in terms of their age, marital status, type of family, fathers' education, and fathers' occupation.**

| S.No | Variables           |                            | n:260 | Percent |
|------|---------------------|----------------------------|-------|---------|
| 1    | Age                 | 20 to 22 years old         | 215   | 82.7    |
|      |                     | 23 to 25 years old         | 45    | 17.3    |
| 2    | Marital status      | Married                    | 7     | 2.7     |
|      |                     | Unmarried                  | 253   | 97.3    |
| 3    | Type of family      | Nuclear                    | 242   | 93.1    |
|      |                     | Joint                      | 18    | 6.9     |
| 4    | Fathers' Education  | Non-Literate               | 30    | 11.5    |
|      |                     | Primary school education   | 60    | 23.1    |
|      |                     | Middle school education    | 73    | 28.1    |
|      |                     | Secondary school education | 60    | 23.1    |
|      |                     | Higher secondary education | 20    | 7.7     |
|      |                     | Undergraduate              | 17    | 6.5     |
| 5    | Fathers' Occupation | Daily wagers               | 113   | 43.5    |
|      |                     | Driver                     | 5     | 1.9     |
|      |                     | Agriculture                | 108   | 41.5    |
|      |                     | Business                   | 11    | 4.2     |
|      |                     | Government job             | 7     | 2.7     |
|      |                     | Private job                | 16    | 6.2     |

A majority of the respondents (82.7 percent) were aged 20 to 22 years, while 17.3 percent were aged 23 to 25 years, indicating that most SC female postgraduate students fall into the early adulthood category. Nearly all respondents (97.3 percent) were unmarried, with only 2.7 percent being married, reflecting that most students in this group prioritize education over early marriage. Most respondents (93.1 percent) belonged to nuclear families, while only 6.9 percent were from joint families, suggesting a dominant nuclear family structure in this population. The educational attainment of fathers varied, with 28.1 percent having completed middle school and 23.1 percent having primary or secondary school education. Only a small proportion had higher education, such as undergraduate (6.5 percent) or higher secondary education (7.7 percent), while 11.5 percent were non-literate, indicating a moderate educational background among the respondents' families. The majority of fathers were daily wage earners (43.5 percent) or engaged in agriculture (41.5 percent), reflecting the economic reliance on manual and agrarian labor. A smaller proportion were in business (4.2 percent), private jobs (6.2 percent), or government jobs (2.7 percent), indicating limited access to stable or high-income occupations within the sample group.

**Table No. 2 - Distribution of the respondents in terms of their family monthly income, place of residence, stream of education, years of study, and type of school studies in higher education.**

| S.No | Variables                  |                    | n:260 | Percent |
|------|----------------------------|--------------------|-------|---------|
| 1    | Monthly income             | 4000 to 10000 INR  | 230   | 88.5    |
|      |                            | 10001 to 20000 INR | 20    | 7.7     |
|      |                            | 20001 to 68000 INR | 10    | 3.8     |
| 2    | Place of residence         | Rural              | 239   | 91.9    |
|      |                            | Urban              | 21    | 8.1     |
| 3    | Stream of education        | Arts               | 130   | 50.0    |
|      |                            | Science            | 130   | 50.0    |
| 4    | Year of Study              | First-year         | 133   | 51.2    |
|      |                            | Second year        | 127   | 48.8    |
| 5    | Higher Secondary Education | Government         | 87    | 33.5    |
|      |                            | Government aided   | 89    | 34.2    |
|      |                            | Private school     | 84    | 32.3    |

The table illustrates that most SC female students in higher education come from rural, low-income backgrounds with diverse educational experiences, and there is an equal representation of students from different academic streams and years of study. A majority of the respondents (88.5 percent) came from families with a monthly income of 4000 to 10,000 INR, indicating that most SC female students belong to lower-middle-income households. A small proportion (7.7 percent) had a monthly income between 10,001 to 20,000 INR, while only 3.8 percent reported earning between 20,001 to 68,000 INR, reflecting a relatively low income distribution across the sample.

A significant majority (91.9 percent) of the respondents resided in rural areas, while only 8.1 percent lived in urban settings. This suggests that the majority of the SC female students come from rural backgrounds, where access to higher education may be more limited compared to urban areas. The sample was evenly split between students pursuing Arts (50 percent) and Science (50 percent) streams in their postgraduate education. This balance indicates that both fields are equally represented among SC female students in higher education in this region. The respondents were almost evenly distributed between first-year (51.2 percent) and second-year (48.8 percent) students, suggesting that the data includes a representative sample from both academic years. The respondents had diverse educational backgrounds in terms of the type of school they attended for higher secondary education. A majority attended government-aided schools (34.2 percent), followed by those who attended government schools (33.5 percent) and private schools (32.3 percent). This distribution highlights the varied schooling experiences of the respondents before entering higher education.



**Table No. 3 - Distribution of the respondents in terms of their level of self-esteem**

| S.No | Variable    | n:260 | Percent |
|------|-------------|-------|---------|
| 1    | Self-esteem |       |         |
|      | Low         | 181   | 69.6    |
|      | High        | 79    | 30.4    |

The distribution of respondents based on their level of self-esteem reveals that a significant majority (69.6 percent) of the respondents have low self-esteem, while 30.4 percent have high self-esteem. This indicates that a larger proportion of the SC female students in the study struggle with lower self-esteem, which could be influenced by various socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors. The findings suggest that addressing the factors contributing to low self-esteem in this group may be crucial for enhancing their academic performance and overall well-being.

**Table No. 4 - Relationship between age, family monthly income of the respondents, and self-esteem**

| S.No | Variables                      | R     | Strength  | P     |
|------|--------------------------------|-------|-----------|-------|
| 1    | Age with self-esteem           | -.048 | Very weak | >0.05 |
| 2    | Family Income with Self-esteem | .061  | Very weak | >0.05 |

The Karl Pearson Coefficient of correlation statistical test table portrays that the age of the respondents and self-esteem have no statistically significant linear relationship ( $p>0.05$ ), which means these variables do not tend to either increase or decrease, which was found that there is no statistically significant relationship between age of the respondents and self-esteem [ $r=-.048$ ]. The respondents' family monthly income and self-esteem have no statistically significant linear relationship ( $p>0.05$ ), which means these variables do not tend to either increase or decrease, which was found that there is no statistically significant relationship between respondents' family monthly income and self-esteem [ $r=.061$ ].

**Table No. 5 - Difference between stream of education, years of study, and self-esteem.**

| S.No | Variable       | M     | S.D   | T     | P     |
|------|----------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1    | Stream of Ed   |       |       |       |       |
|      | Arts           | 13.84 | 2.474 | 2.190 | <0.05 |
|      | Science        | 14.48 | 2.280 |       |       |
| 2    | Years of study |       |       |       |       |
|      | First-year     | 14.26 | 2.590 | 0.650 | >0.05 |
|      | Second year    | 14.06 | 2.181 |       |       |

The independent sample 't' statistical test table illustrates that respondents who belonged to the science stream of education had a higher mean score ( $14.48\pm2.280$ ) in the measure of self-esteem scale when compared to the mean score ( $13.84\pm2.474$ ) of the respondents who belonged to the arts stream of education, which was found that there is a statistically significant difference between stream of education of the respondents and self-esteem [ $t=2.190$ ,  $p<0.05$ ]. It has been inferred that respondents who belonged to the science stream of education possessed higher self-esteem. The respondents who were studying first-year graduation had a slightly higher mean score ( $14.26\pm2.590$ ) in the measure of self-esteem scale when compared to the mean score ( $14.06\pm2.181$ ) of the respondents who were studying second-year graduation, which was found that there is no statistically significant difference between years of study of the respondents and

self-esteem [ $t=0.65$ ,  $p>0.05$ ]. it has been inferred that respondents who were studying first-year graduation have possessed a slightly higher self-esteem.

**Table No. 6** - Variance among types of schools' studies in higher education and self-esteem.

| S.No | Variable    | S.Q                         | M                                | S.D                     | F     | P     |
|------|-------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------|-------|-------|
| 1    | Self-esteem | B. G=5.471<br>W. G=1481.744 | G1=13.98<br>G2=14.18<br>G3=14.33 | 2.597<br>2.410<br>2.170 | 0.474 | >0.05 |

G1=Government G2=Government Aided G3=Private school

The One-Way Analysis of Variance statistical test table explains that respondents who studied their higher secondary education in private school had a slightly higher mean score ( $14.33 \pm 2.170$ ) in the measure of self-esteem followed by the mean score ( $14.18 \pm 2.40$ ) of the respondents who studied their higher secondary education in government aided schools and then government schools ( $13.98 \pm 2.597$ ), which was found that there is no statistically significant variance among type of school studies in higher secondary education and self-esteem. It has been inferred that respondents who studied their higher secondary education in private schools possessed higher self-esteem followed by respondents who studied their higher secondary education in government-aided schools and then government schools.

**Table No. 7** - Association between the type of family of the respondents and self-esteem

| S.No | Variable | Low               | High             | $\chi^2$ | Df | P     |
|------|----------|-------------------|------------------|----------|----|-------|
| 1    | Nuclear  | 165(68.2 percent) | 77(31.8 percent) | 3.396    | 1  | >0.05 |
| 2    | Joint    | 16(88.9 percent)  | 2(11.1)          |          |    |       |

The table examines the association between the type of family (nuclear vs. joint) and the self-esteem of the respondents. The findings are as follows:

1. **Nuclear Family:** Among the respondents from nuclear families, 68.2 percent had low self-esteem, while 31.8 percent had high self-esteem. This suggests that most students from nuclear families reported lower self-esteem, though a substantial proportion still exhibited high self-esteem.
2. **Joint Family:** In contrast, among the respondents from joint families, a higher proportion (88.9 percent) had low self-esteem, with only 11.1 percent reporting high self-esteem. This indicates that students from joint families experienced significantly lower self-esteem compared to their counterparts in nuclear families.

The chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) value is 3.396 with a degree of freedom (df) of 1 and a p-value greater than 0.05. This suggests that there is no statistically significant association between the type of family and the level of self-esteem among the respondents. While there is a noticeable difference in the distribution of self-esteem levels between the two family types, the p-value indicates that this difference is not statistically significant. Therefore, the type of family does not appear to be a major determinant of self-esteem in this sample of SC female students.

### 3.1 Discussion

The socio-demographic profile of the respondents reveals that a majority of SC female postgraduate students come from rural, economically disadvantaged backgrounds, with a predominance of nuclear family structures. A significant proportion of respondents (88.5 percent) have family incomes between 4000 to 10,000 INR, suggesting that they belong to lower-middle-income households. The educational background of their fathers indicates limited access to higher education, with a substantial number having only completed middle or primary school levels. These socio-economic conditions are aligned with earlier studies that highlight how lower socio-economic status, rural background, and parental education levels influence the academic performance and well-being of students (Browne et al., 2017; Pomerantz et al., 2018). Additionally, a larger proportion of students report low self-esteem, which can be attributed to the socio-cultural pressures faced by students from marginalized communities. These factors point to the challenges these students face in higher education, which may affect their self-perception, academic success, and overall development.

In terms of self-esteem, the findings show that most respondents report low self-esteem (69.6 percent), which is consistent with studies that highlight the negative impact of socio-economic adversity on mental health and self-perception (Tiwari & Sharma, 2020). Despite the challenges, the study found that students in the Science stream exhibited significantly higher self-esteem compared to those in the Arts stream. This aligns with earlier studies (Srinivasan & Saravanan, 2021), which found that students in scientific disciplines tend to have higher self-esteem due to perceived academic and professional success. Moreover, there is no statistically significant relationship between self-esteem and the type of family or family income, suggesting that self-esteem may be more influenced by personal and academic experiences rather than familial factors, as indicated by previous research (Baskar et al., 2022). While family structure did show some variance in self-esteem levels, the lack of a statistically significant association suggests that other individual-level factors, such as academic stream and year of study, play a more prominent role in shaping self-esteem among SC female students in higher education.

### 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

- It is crucial to implement targeted interventions aimed at enhancing the self-esteem of SC female students, as a significant proportion (69.6 percent) were found to have low self-esteem. Programs focusing on boosting confidence and providing psychological support may help improve their academic performance and mental well-being.
- Given the socio-economic challenges reflected in the respondents' low family income and rural background, it is recommended to provide financial assistance, scholarships, and career counseling to reduce the financial burden on students and offer pathways to stable, rewarding careers.
- Universities and colleges should develop mentoring programs that focus on academic, personal, and professional growth to support students from nuclear and rural family backgrounds. These programs could serve as platforms for guidance and emotional support, helping students overcome barriers posed by their socio-economic conditions.
- The findings suggest that students in the science stream have higher self-esteem compared to those in the arts stream. It may be beneficial to introduce initiatives within arts programs, such as peer support groups, skills development workshops, and exposure to career opportunities, to bolster the confidence and self-esteem of arts students.
- Encouraging family engagement, particularly with parents, could play a vital role in the students' development. Family counseling and awareness programs for parents, especially those with lower educational levels, could help in fostering a supportive environment for the students' academic and personal growth.



- As most respondents come from rural areas, universities should consider establishing satellite campuses, online learning options, or remote learning resources to provide more accessible educational opportunities for students from rural backgrounds.
- The lack of a significant relationship between family income and self-esteem suggests that factors other than financial status, such as personal and institutional support, play a larger role in influencing self-esteem. Universities and colleges should prioritize the mental and emotional well-being of students, regardless of their financial background, through counseling and wellness programs.
- The varied educational experiences in higher secondary schools (government, government-aided, and private) suggest that interventions aimed at improving the quality of education at all levels are essential. Improving infrastructure, teacher training, and learning resources in government and government-aided schools could help reduce educational disparities.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The study reveals that SC female postgraduate students experience varying levels of self-esteem, with a majority exhibiting low self-esteem. Socio-demographic factors such as age, marital status, family income, and type of family appear to influence self-esteem, but the findings also suggest that educational factors, such as the stream of study and the type of school attended during higher secondary education, have a more pronounced impact on students' self-perception. Addressing the socio-economic challenges and providing tailored support systems in educational institutions can help enhance the self-esteem and academic success of these students. For further studies, it would be valuable to explore the impact of specific interventions, such as counseling programs, peer support systems, and mentorship, on improving self-esteem in SC female students. Additionally, longitudinal studies could investigate how self-esteem evolves throughout the academic journey and its long-term effects on career success and personal development. Further research could also examine the role of family dynamics, including parental support, in shaping the self-esteem of students from different socio-economic backgrounds.

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