

GIRLS WITHOUT POWER IN INDIA

Despite islands of progress and even a paradoxical government-run success, the larger picture of girls' education and their empowerment is dismal. There is an enormous gap between fact and paper fiction, and the task for feminists and activists is cut out, says Deepti Priya Mehrotra,

- Education for empowerment' has been a handy slogan for the government while promoting the rights of a girl child. But what does March 8 (International Women's Day) mean for millions of girls in India who cannot attend or finish school because they have to graze cattle, labour in the house or fields, or are sexually harassed and humiliated by their teachers/principals?

Does empowerment mean anything at all to Naina, 13, who is in Class 2, lives in Muzaffarpur district (Bihar) and works in the local landlord's haveli (palatial house)? Naina goes for her morning shift (7 am to 9.30 am) to the haveli, then attends school (10 am to 4 pm) and is back again for the evening shift from 6 pm to 10 pm. Her parents work with the same landlord as bonded agricultural labourers. Most probably, Naina will not be able to study beyond Class 5.

In some schools, girls are denied facilities to play or use the science lab. Many teachers talk exclusively to boys, paying no attention to the girls, and only boys answer or are active in class.

Her circumstances won't let her.

Although admission of girls has gone up significantly over the past few years, is it any wonder that attendance and retention rates are low? According to a recently concluded research study 'Gender Discrimination: Impact on Lives of Girls in School in four States (Bihar, UP, Rajasthan, Delhi)', large numbers - over 50 per cent - drop out of schooling before or at the point of transition from Class 5 to Class 6. The reasons are the same: they have to look after siblings; they have to do household chores; or work to support the family. It's not as if the government is unaware of the issues at stake. In fact, central and state governments have devised excellent policies to improve the conditions for girls' schooling. Schools are closer to homes, scholarships and mid-day meals have been introduced in many districts, and community mobilisation focused on girls' schooling is encouraged in many areas.

Furthermore, the government plans to set up balika shivirs (residential camps for girls), bridge courses and some 750 residential schools (Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas) for under-privileged girls in difficult-to-reach areas. The National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level envisages a 'model cluster school' per cluster (that is, 8 to 10 villages) - in 'educationally backward blocks'. These model schools are envisaged as girl-friendly, with provision for special incentives, libraries, gender-sensitisation of teachers, crèches next to schools, girls' collectives (Meena Manch) and Mothers' Committees.

Despite such ambitious plans, the harsh reality is that government-run schools are hardly in a position to act as agents of progressive social transformation - *even as* these are the only schools making any realistic attempt to reach out to large numbers of girls. Parents - even in patriarchy-ridden rural north India - want to send their girls to school. But schools purvey gender stereotypes, hardly different from the rest of society.

Girls huddle separately within the classroom in co-educational schools. In some schools, they are denied facilities to play or use the science lab - which boys have access to.

Many teachers talk exclusively to boys, paying no attention to the girls, and only (some) boys answer or are active in class.

The four-states research revealed that nearly all girls complete a number of household tasks before coming to school. This means they arrive tired, and often late. There is no transport to school - some girls walk an hour in the morning, and another hour on the way back in the afternoon/evening. However, teachers scold and punish girls who arrive late, or who have low attendance. The number of female teachers is highly inadequate - although girls and parents express a strong preference for female teachers.

Despite education being touted as a tool for empowerment, recent and old research clearly indicate that schooling is not an empowering experience for most girls. Most schools have next to no notion of girls' or women's rights. Textbooks are suffused with gender bias (far more stories centre around boys than girls, far more pictures of boys and men, and far more boys and men in stereotypical active roles, girls and women in passive roles). This serves to reinforce, in the minds of children, that gender is 'natural'.

Schools fail to take note of endemic violence in homes, on streets and in communities. There is no counseling for girls who have difficult lives. There is no attempt to address the emotional and psychological needs of children. In fact, there is explicit violence even within the schools - beating, abusive language, and (difficult to research) gender-based, including sexual, violence.

A headmaster of a primary school, Delhi, said, "I was determined to build a boundary wall to protect the girls. Earlier ruffians would walk into class with knives!" The school today has a boundary wall, but no guards. Girls often slip out to go home especially since the school has no toilets or drinking water facilities.

Precious little teaching or learning takes place in many schools. A mother whose daughter is in Class 5 in a school in Sangam Vihar, Delhi, fumes: "The teachers don't teach. My daughter can hardly read or write, despite all her efforts."

Although a number of NGOs such as Eklavya, Nirantar, Ankur, Digantar, Urmul and Aditi have focused on improving education, particularly girls' education, these have remained small-scale efforts, restricted to certain pockets of the country. And paradoxically, the biggest scheme demonstrating positive links between education and empowerment is a government-run scheme (presently running in nine states) called the Mahila Samakhya. It draws in the energies of several movement activists, providing it with energy and direction.

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