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Girls and Schools: Desiderata for the Third World

Many nation-states have made impressive strides to ensure that children, especially girls go to school and stay there for as long as possible. In India, thousands of socially vulnerable girls study at the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) residential schools in completing 8th standard and then moving to regular schools or to the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) residential schools under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, one of the largest social sector initiatives by the Central government, which are implemented by the states.

But is this sufficient? Why do girls, especially from poorer communities in third world countries, continue to drop out of school? Recent research shows that in the South Indian state of Karnataka, over 30% of girls were married before the age of 18, despite efforts by both Government and civil society to promote higher age at marriage, build awareness on the huge disadvantages of child marriage to the individual, family and society, empower child protection systems by appointing, training and equipping child protection officers and local government bodies with laws and powers to prevent child marriage.

In three decades of work with children and women, I have come across many cases of structural violence against them. The most difficult to address is that of social attitudes. The most important approach to addressing this is the education and sensitization of the community on their rights, and the duties of the community and the state to this crucial but much-neglected section of human society. It is only in the past two decades that a concerted effort has been proposed and activated to increase the access of women and girls to education, especially the latter.

But patriarchal norms have their own way to subvert these efforts, and often the political will displayed by governments in enacting laws and devising schemes is undermined by the lack of commitment, or even the negative attitude of society to the progress and development of women and girls, through half-hearted implementation or downright disruption.

A recent real-life case study, from a South Indian, may help us understand the forces playing on the girl child, her education, schooling, adolescence, and early adulthood; issues of gender, sexuality, security and social mores, of reproductive roles and domestic labour, and the government and legal system and its attitude.

The case¹ is of a young girl of Dalit parents who lives in an urban poor area to the northern end of the city. She completed Std.7 in the higher primary school near her home and took admission in a high school about 2 km from her home, and began to attend school regularly. Being a pretty and tall 14 year

¹ See detailed case study at the end of the report.

old, a young man of about 19, living opposite her home, was attracted to her and began to follow her to school and back. The mother was the main breadwinner, being a domestic worker, and had little time to spare to monitor the girl regularly, but she did try for a while to accompany the girl to school and back. The boy however was very persistent and following community pressure the mother agreed to get the girl married to the boy within a few months. The girl got pregnant in weeks and delivered a baby boy at about 15 years of age. When the case came to my notice the baby was a few months old, and the mother reported regular domestic violence in the girl's home. I suggested that it was possible to send both the girl and the baby to a special residential school run by the government which would enable the girl to resume studies and also protect her. The mother thought it an impossible option.

But in about 6 months the stress of housework, motherhood, poverty and marriage to an immature husband took its toll, and by the time the girl was 17 there was mutual aversion on the part of the couple. The mother decided to bring the girl to the hostel and keep the boy-child with her. The girl is now admitted to the hostel and resumed formal schooling.

There are many **lessons to be learnt** from this case, which is not uncommon in any part of the third world, nor even the poor in some developed countries. Here are some of the most important ones:

Clearly, many structural factors had a role to play, **first, the location of the school**. The **lack** of a high school **nearer home**, causing her to walk to school gave ample opportunity for her to be 'stalked' on the way. In India and most of South Asia, this is a key reason for families to stop their daughters from school after puberty.

The **second factor is the socialization in the community which prepares girls for marriage from infancy, and not for education or a career;**

Social **pressure on parents to get the girl married at the earliest for fear of sexual predation from random males** in the locality, due to the **premium on the virginity of the girl at the time of marriage**, and the **lack of protection to the girl from sexual exploitation, and the associated social stigma** in her locality is another **big driver of girl-child dropout and early marriage**.

Girls from poor, vulnerable migrant and marginalized groups or minorities are at higher risk because perpetrators fear no action from the police which does not take action on complaints filed by these sections. Indeed, the police in most third world are quite likely to support the more powerful perpetrators of gender violence by males especially from the dominant sections.

So the families keep their girls at home and groom them for domesticity, to the exclusion of any other options.

On the other hand, **young men feel it is their prerogative to aggressively pursue any girl they take a fancy to** especially from the poorer sections, and **families and the community tacitly support this behavior through weak controls over his behavior**, and use this to **encourage marriage even if the parties are underage**. There is a sense of entitlement on the part of men in society to access to girls, and a complementary denial of girls' autonomy of life choices. Often girls who reject the overtures of boys –

whether for friendship or for a romantic relationship are thought to be 'arrogant' or 'insensitive' and therefore need to be 'punished' for this. It has fuelled the most horrible hate crimes including knifing in public, or even acid attacks against girls and women.

This is **reinforced by popular films and media consumed by the young men**, which depict their 'heroes' as young/adolescent **males who forcefully 'woo' girls on the way to school/college, often successfully using coercion and blackmail to gain their attention.**

Often, these media products also depict the 'heroes' as either academic underachievers or as being from the working class, bringing the stories **close to the lived experiences of the young male audience**, whose fantasies of wooing and winning a girl above one's station – even if it is in the form of higher educational attainment - become a real-life experience given the societal norms and practices.

In this case even the 'man' was barely 20 at marriage. Despite the law prohibiting child marriage, and campaigns against it on the TV, in schools, and by NGOs, **the practice continues almost unabated all over South Asia where it enjoys is strong social sanction and support.** The **government cannot be absolved of responsibility due to weak information dissemination against the practice.** It is hardly known that early marriage is outlawed and perpetrators liable for punishment.

Poor implementation of the law due to lack of political will and negative attitude of the officials, who often do not take action for fear of community backlash, or because even they do not believe in preventing child marriage. Further these officials do not face official censure from the higher-ups for the same reason: apathy to the issue.

Thus poverty, gender discrimination, unimplemented legal frameworks, community norms including those for (gendered) masculine behavior, insecure incomes, and most of all, the wide-spread attitude that the domestic sphere is the inevitable and inescapable destiny for girls/women drives the practice, even as slow progress is made to change this attitude.

Even if the family's scarce resources are used for the child's education, there is no guarantee that suitable employment will result in decent and appropriate employment to the socially vulnerable. Even **bachelor's degree-holders among the poor are found as casual manual labour in construction and transport sectors (men) and in the service sector (women).** A key reason is **the negative attitude of employers towards hiring young people from disadvantaged backgrounds for white-collar jobs**, while bribery and corruption make it impossible for them to access government jobs. Hence families in general hesitate to invest in education especially higher education and especially for girls.

Given the **proven global reality that educating girls has a huge socio-economic dividend at a societal level: delaying under-age pregnancy with its health and survival challenges to both mother and child, giving critical personal knowledge and understanding on survival skills, literacy, and citizenship rights and responsibilities, the opportunity for emotional and psychological maturity, and most important, the knowledge and skills necessary to negotiate the changing social and economic scenario through educated and involved participation,**

What more can institutions and families do to change the reality?

Governments and families spending on the education of the young and especially of girl children are investing in the future. Why then are these attainments so hard to achieve?

Government needs to do more to

1. Address Persistent Patriarchal norms by showing the political will to implement legislation which is girl-child friendly especially the laws prohibiting child marriage.
2. Recognize and work to reverse the growing trend of misogyny in society by taking firm action against those engaging in violence against women and girls, especially coercion in relation to marriage.
3. Speak directly to community groupings like clan leadership groups on attitudes and issues which violate gender rights of women and girls
4. Invest more in policies and programmes to keep girls in educational and vocational training institutions for longer periods, thus mainstreaming them in the organized economic sphere.
5. Formulate and implement definite time-bound strategies to educate the society on a more gender-friendly family norms and practices to promote equality and justice in society at large.
6. Work to promote full and free participation and voice for women at all levels of society, including implementing norms and laws to promote their equal participation in all forms of systems and government institutions especially in positions of decision-making.
7. Address gender-insensitive media productions which promote and normalize violent images which desensitize society to violence and promote a weak social and judicial response to gender violence of all kinds. Freedom of speech cannot be used to justify content which dehumanizes people especially women and children of vulnerable groups.

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CASE STUDY:

Three years ago, Geetha, 13, was promoted to the 8th Standard. She had to change schools, going to one about half a kilometer from her house in a slum. She was exceptionally tall for her age, and slim. She caught the eye of the boy, Raju then 19, next door. Raju, now 21, went to school for one year when he was 6, but ran away when the teacher used corporal punishment to insist on his doing homework. He played with others children near his house for a few years and when he was about 12, joined other men from his locality at work on a construction site nearby. So when Geetha started for school with her bag, Raju followed her and tried to make conversation. Though frightened that her parents would spot this, she secretly enjoyed being sought after daily by this nice-looking young fellow, who seemed very jealous

when she spoke to her classmates who walked with her. Soon this was noticed and elders spoke to the boy's parents. "Seems your boy likes Geetha. We see them talking near the school." News soon reached the girl's parents, sparking predictable scenes. Geetha was soundly beaten. Neighbours ran in to mediate. Geetha's mother began to accompany her to school, but not for long – she was a domestic worker and had to go to work early every morning. Some elderly ladies advised, "Why send her to school, get her married to this boy. She looks quite grown up for her age, and the boy seems really fond of her." The mother, Sheela had different plans, since she herself had never been to school and married at 13. She wanted her daughter to be a teacher. But with an alcoholic husband, who demanded money for drink in addition to her support the family, Sheela had little option but go to work regularly. Geetha's younger brother studied well and was regular to school. Sheela also paid for his education in an aided school.

Emboldened by the exposure, Raju began to walk with Geetha daily to and from school. When term holidays arrived, they could not meet daily. He suggested that they elope. Geetha, by now completely under his thumb, agreed and began secreting clothes in a bag, which Sheela discovered. All hell broke loose. Both were beaten black and blue by her father. Local opinion suggested that since the "girl's name was spoilt", and anyway the affair was common knowledge, why not get the young people married? After all, this would be better than the disgrace of their running away. So Geetha was soon married to Raju in a simple ceremony. She was about 13 and a half. In a few weeks, she became pregnant and in due time, a healthy baby was born after a high-risk delivery in a big government hospital, to the delight of the whole family.

Raju got work intermittently as a construction labourer. As the child grew, the stress of motherhood caused Geetha to become irritable and cry easily. She could not do any domestic work at home, and tired of nursing and caring for the child. While her mother did her best, she was not able to keep the situation from escalating. Tensions grew. At the child's first birthday, the mother was not yet 16. The relationship began to deteriorate, and Raju began to beat her up. In a present-day twist, the girl retaliated in kind!

Sheela said, "I am not talking to my daughter, she needs to be punished for her rudeness to her husband. She calls him names, and even beats him back when he beats her!" I tried to explain that in the present day adolescents have so many contrasting role models, and Geetha was finding the situation too much to handle. I encouraged Sheela to consider negotiating with the in-laws to permit her to join the KGBV or at least to allow her to join the Mahila Shikshan Kendra (MSK), which are informal residential facilities, including schooling, being run by the Mahila Samakhya Karnataka for women and girls at risk. Sheela looked shocked, saying: "But she is now married. How can she go away to school?" and dismissed the idea. Months passed. Raju continued to be jealously possessive, and insisted that Geetha stay at home even when they had nothing to eat as he had not gone to work for days. After another huge quarrel, in which the police was involved but refused to file cases, the family agreed that Geetha would be provided money daily to keep the home fires burning. Needless to say the arrangement soon broke down, with the boy's family alleging that she was a spendthrift.

Finally Geetha took on domestic work, taking the toddler with her, but often Sheela had to go and get the child who was a 'hindrance' as he wanted his mother's attention while she was working. Things went on in this way till one day Sheela called. "Akka (elder sister), please can you send Geetha away to the school you told me about?" she asked abruptly. "She does not want to go back, and he too says he does not want her. So I want to send her far away and let her resume her studies."

Soon they turned up, and Geetha was sent to study in one of Mahila Samakhya's institutions in a nearby town, infant son cared for by his 32-yr old grandmother. Geetha declares she is fed up of Raju's physical and verbal abuse, jealousy and psychological violence. He, however, is searching for her, and demanding a reunion. The situation may turn volatile if he decides to aggressively pursue her, especially as the child is still in the vicinity. If he finds the residential school where she studies he is sure to create a big scene and demand she leave at once to continue life with him.

The issues that militated against Geetha's uninterrupted schooling are discussed in the submission above.

Cynthia Stephen is an activist researcher working on the issues of gender, poverty, inclusion and development policy, and has been involved in leadership and advisory roles on these topics in several institutions at state, regional and national level. She has also written extensively on these subjects.
