**KEEPING GIRLS IN SECONDARY SCHOOL: CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES’**

A Karnataka state conference on addressing barriers to secondary education for adolescent girls

Date: 20 & 21 June 2015 Venue: Hotel Travel Inn, Dharwad

Working with adolescent girls to address child marriage

(Panel discussion on what has worked to keep girls in schools: evidence and practices)

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The widespread practice of child marriage and early marriage in Rajasthan is the single-most reason for lack of access to education for girls in general and higher education in particular. Perceived lack of use of education to further income-earning goals of family and also lack of livelihood opportunities for girls and women are also responsible for this state of affairs.

While state level data indicate that there is some improvement in the situation of education and reduction in number of child marriages, ground level realities contradict this. General perception of people in towards girls’ education child marriages remains largely unchanged.

**Situation of Secondary School Education for Girls in Rajasthan**

Rajasthan is no different than other states in the performance of the education services sector in terms of addressing girls’ drop outs and retention issues. Even though number of schools and teachers, particularly in the primary sector, has increased gender sensitivity of the system as a whole and teachers in particular remains appallingly disappointing. Quality of education has not improved concurrently with the number of schools and teachers (and their salaries!). While one finds excess number of teachers in the urban areas their numbers in rural areas is low – teachers’ posts continue to remain vacant in many rural schools. Additionally, schools lack facilities such as drinking water and toilets.

Socially too the progress in perspectives of parents and their communities seems too diminishing compared to new factors that have emerged causing increased dangers of sexual violence against girls in relation to education. Streets and neighborhoods have increasingly become unsafe and lack of accountability of teachers is rampant. Teachers lack the sensitivity and skills in handling issues faced by adolescent girls and boys. Parents are worried about the safety of their daughters on the way and in schools. Several incidents report parents and community beating up teachers ‘misbehaving’ with girl students.

Situation of secondary education is even worse than at the primary level. It is quite well acknowledged by the government that most dropout of girls happen when they have to move over from the upper primary level to the secondary level. Factors like girls having grown up (attained puberty), threat of sexual violence, distance from home, lack of hostel facilities are mainly responsible for this. Added to this is the threat parents face is possible involvement of their daughters with boys at the school. Such kinds of threats to education are complicated by teachers’ inability to handle them with sensitivity. Marriage at the point when girls move from primary to secondary (or *gauna* – that is sending off an already married girl to her in-laws family) is a result of girls’ drop out. A child marriage is also responsible for causing dropout.

Considering that above mentioned factors of drop outs and discontinuation of education for girls one would expect there would be more number of girls’ only secondary schools. However, this is not so; a mere 10% of all schools at the secondary/ senior secondary level are girls’ only schools while co-ed schools are generally known and perceived as ‘boys schools’. Usually girls are admitted to these schools only when they opt for subjects that are seen as ‘boys’ subjects – such as science and math. Even number of female teachers is abysmally low compared to their male counterparts. [[1]](#footnote-1)

Gross Enrolment Ratio for girls drops sharply when they move from the primary to the secondary level. GER is a mere 14.9 for the state as a whole for girls. The GER for SC girls is even lower at 8.9 indicating continued disadvantage girls from SC communities face and the educational backwardness of these communities.

**Working with Adolescent Girls and Women for Continued Education:**

Mahila Jan Adhikar Samiti (MJAS) works in Ajmer, Tonk and Bhilwara districts of central Rajasthan mainly with women and children. The work of the organization in its initial years was focused on married women in their prime and middle ages. Around 2002-03 we realized the organization needed to work with different age groups of women and girls. This led to a change in our approaches and focus from one dealing with violence against women to include child rights issues as well. At present the organization focuses on girls and boys in the age group of 10-20.

The geographical areas of work of the organization include areas that are moderately well-off and as well as those that are backward. What is common is the increasing perception of the rural communities of being under threat due to new laws and governmental practices. While on the global stage definition of ‘rights’ goes on expanding – and the same are reflected in the laws and policies of the governments, rural communities feel threats to their traditional practices and belief. There is a gap in the understanding on social and economic issues between the global and the local communities. One important element of the understanding of progress among the rural communities is that of perpetuating and expanding their family lineage. For this it becomes necessary to fully exploit the labour and reproductive capacity of women – practice of child marriage is related to this perception of rural communities. This world view prevents them from appreciating the rationale of expanded definitions of rights for all, particularly women. They feel marginalized and impoverished due to these trends that challenge their traditional practices and belief with regard to gender and social relations; their livelihoods and lifestyles become unsustainable. This results in the strengthening of practices such as child marriage, bride-exhange (locally known as Atta-Satta), traditonal remarriage practices (known locally as *nata*), the Jati Panchayats etc. These institutions keep a watch over marital practices and penalise any deviations; they keep a moral binding over the community and even those families that want to adopt changed practices cannot to so under thier pressure.

Thus unless we intervene in the institutional and structural root causes of the institutions of marriage and related social and economic cultural system; unless we create new values and aspirations it will not be possible to adequately address the problems of higher education for girls. At the same time girls and boys should be able to obtain the type of education and skills and have opportunities to use them and exercise their aspirations. They should also have the opportunity to choose their life partners.

MJAS works in such a situation and adopts the following means to address child marriages:

* Creating different forums at the village level so that everyone has space for participation in the social affairs of the village. These we see as important to balance the co-opting nature of the governmental programs and schemes. Through Aware Citizens Committees the organization mobilises the rural communities to gain rights as laid down in the laws of the country. Similarly forums for children – such as Baal Samuh, Kishori Samuh, Yuva Samuh - also provide opportunities for them to participate in the affairs of the rural community.
* We work with adolescent girls to create awareness about their identities (understanding that it is lack of independent identities for women that are at the root of marginalization of girls and women). We empower girls to obtain their birth certificates, Transfer Certificates from schools and bank accounts. We also train girls to increase their articulation and physical mobility by providing opportunities for the same
* Training adolescent girls to identify and map resources, services and units of local governance of their village. We empower them about their rights to these resources, services and participation in the process of governance. We try and combine life skills education and livelihood training
* Promoting girls’ aspirations to higher education, new skills, jobs and sources of livelihood
* Strengthening dialogue between girls and boys assisting them in coping with challenges of co-education
* Strengthening the role of women’s organizations/ groups in supporting prevention or delay of child marriages. This we feel is very important as it is women who can really protect their daughters and other girls in the community
* Preparing children to raise their voices; strengthening social support structures that help them in dealing with resulting consequences
* Assisting mothers in their struggles and mobilizing other women and men around these struggles so that patriarchal practices are challenged.

1. ERU Consultants Pvt ltd, 2014 .’Women teachers and the achievement of gender and equity goals in secondary education: An exploratory study in Rajasthan’ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)