

Pre-adolescent Girls in Municipal Schools in Mumbai

Pre-adolescent girls are seldom the focus of policies or research. Yet this is the stage when the girls' concepts of womanhood begin to get constructed and they begin to be treated as women-in-the-making. The study which forms the basis of this note was concerned with pre-adolescent girls in municipal schools in Mumbai.

VACHA KISHORI PROJECT TEAM

Education is the real security. Without it, an army and bombs are of no use.

—Yash Pal

For education to provide security to women it must raise their self-esteem and create capacity to negotiate power and break gender biases. As Nitya Rao cautions, "While education does undoubtedly have a functional value, it also has an intrinsic value in terms of empowering individuals and communities for effective citizenship, consolidating democratic governance, promoting creativity and a culture of peace.... Education, however, cannot on its own provide the solution to all problems, nor is it an alternative to other development programmes or structural change. Where people live at a subsistence level, a convergence of different sectoral and development programmes is essential" [Rao 2000].

It is true that convergence programmes are difficult to evolve but the curriculum can be made interdisciplinary to take into account the various needs of the students as community members and individuals. All the debates and perspectives involved in determining the curriculum is least concerned about the special needs of the various groups. Universalisation is the aim and objective without providing for quality and relevance of the education package.

While PROBE (1999) deals with education of the rural poor in five north Indian states there is hardly any study on school education in the urban situation. In order to document school education, especially in the context of girls in the urban poor sector, we first worked with girls attending municipal schools in higher primary sections. Vacha ran a programme of enrichment of girls of the age 9-13 attending municipal schools in Santa Cruz, Mumbai. The programme included running a library

with books in regional languages, running special classes for English language learning, organising workshops in theatre, music, art and other cultural activities. Girl students would visit the Vacha Centre before or after their school shift. Interaction with them and the concerns arising out of it led to a research and action project with over 2,500 girls in 33 schools that taught through seven different languages [Vacha 2002].

Background

Pre-adolescent girls are seldom a focus of policies or research. And yet this is the stage when their concepts of womanhood begin to get more clearly constructed and they begin to get treated as women in the making. The main objective of the study was to look into the socio-cultural bases of health, produce a clear picture of their reality and involve policy-makers, social activists, NGOs, media and welfare organisations in supporting the issue of girls at this crucial stage of development and to make a difference through the education system. The research was carried out during 1998-2001.

There are schemes for and studies on women in the reproductive age bracket. This is also the situation with new-born girls, infants and young children. Somewhere around the age of 6 or 7 the girl-child seems to disappear from schemes and studies until she re-emerges as a young woman after she enters the reproductive age group. This is the concern of the Bal-Kishori project, the 'kishori' is neither a 'balika', a child, nor yet a 'stree', a woman. She falls in the early stage of this middle period.

The research team found it necessary to look into the diversity of gender discrimination in multicultural Mumbai where people from different castes and regions

and religions coexist and communities are formed with different combinations of these. Mumbai has long been renowned for its cosmopolitan nature. Globalisation has brought about changes in the city and state policies have affected the lives of the poor adversely. These changes have happened from the 1990s due to the adoption of structural adjustment programme in the state. This has gone hand-in-hand with increasing communal and caste divisions and strife. The result has been a charged atmosphere where the minority communities and depressed classes have been at the receiving end. Crime has gone up and the streets are no longer safe. In such a charged atmosphere a girl's mobility is restricted to the school and the near by market, while TV is the only source of entertainment and exposure to the wider world.

Schools were selected from different parts of the city to capture different aspects of the city and varied effects of globalisation and urbanisation on communities. The difference in geographical diversity in the city itself told its own story. Thirty-three schools from seven regional medium schools were selected from areas as varied as a fishing 'village', the former textile mill sector and a south Mumbai locality from where resident population is migrating to north Mumbai.

The project was implemented with the permission and cooperation of the education department of the Municipal Corporation. Individual dialogues with girls took place with an interview schedule designed to cover and explore multiple aspects of urban life as experienced by girls.

Municipal schools in several areas and in different language sections are closing down due to low enrolment resulting from shifting population and, more significantly, a rising preference for private schools. Unlike what national figures indicate about

enrolment of girls in post-primary schools, in municipal schools in the city 50.1 per cent of the students are girls. This is because parents prefer to send sons to private schools, preferably English medium. It may also be that girls are supposed to carry on cultural traditions and learn the family/community language. Only municipal schools provide a wide range of regional language education. It will be interesting to find out if the boys who do attend municipal schools are from still lower economic strata, where parents cannot afford private schools even for sons.

Findings and Lessons

(1) *Mothers' work and occupation:* In the sample, 61.19 per cent (1,474 girls) had mothers who were full-time home-makers, out of whom 14.74 per cent (355 girls) reported that their mothers do not work. Mothers of girls from Hindi medium schools turned out to be the majority (77.33 per cent) of full-time home-makers; 11.25 per cent (271) were domestic workers and 9.38 per cent self-employed. The proportion of mothers earning a cash income by either employment outside or doing something from home turned out to be low. The poor participation of women from this group in market-related work came as a surprise. Most girl interviewees did not wish to follow the occupations of their mothers. During a consultation meeting organised to discuss this project, advocate-activist Flavia Agnes said she had noticed that landless and single mothers who migrate to Mumbai show a capacity to survive as small-time hawkers. These working mothers' daughters were found to be the early dropouts. These earning mothers felt the need to educate their daughters because they themselves had dropped out early, being first generation schoolgoers. They could neither adjust to the rough and arduous work the mothers did nor find remunerative work elsewhere.

(2) *Fathers' work and occupation:* 45.67 per cent (1,062 girls) had fathers who were salary-earners., 32.06 (742 girls) had self-employed fathers and 4.36 per cent (101 girls) had fathers who were unemployed. It is not only rickshaw-pullers and carpenters or vendors who send their daughters to municipal schools; we find even those with regular salaried jobs who do so. The reason could be the location of the school and the medium of instruction. There are very few private schools in Mumbai that offer instruction in regional languages other

than Marathi and Gujarati and municipal schools may therefore be a desirable option even for the relatively well-to-do in the sample.

(3) *Knowledge of income and expenses:* 29.62 per cent (755 girls) were aware of the income of the family and 7.96 per cent (203 girls) aware of expenses of the family. The girls perform most of the daily chores, including shopping for essentials. But they had minimal knowledge of family expenses and a somewhat better understanding of family incomes. Qualitative remarks reveal that large expenses are incurred on brothers' education in the form of fees and tuitions because the boys are attending private English medium schools.

(4) *Work:* A girl in this transitional age-group is useful for work in spite of being young and raw. She too wants to be considered an adult which gives her some status though it imposes an additional burden of work.

Our survey indicates that almost 60 per cent of the girls will drop out of schools which will exclude them from all other social institutions except the family. These girls, even while in school, carry out almost 60 per cent of the work of the household. This unrecognised work is considered training for their future role as wives and mothers. It is obvious they are trained not just for work, but also for docility and for working without recognition or decision-making powers 97.6 per cent (2,480 girls) reported helping mothers in some activity, 59.75 per cent (1,517 girls) do all kinds of house work, 36.23 per cent (920 girls) fill water, clean and wash.

(5) *Wage earning work:* 12.13 per cent girls (308) are in gainful employment. These girls are directly engaged in earning activity such as prawn shelling or domestic labour. According to the PROBE study, children who do not attend schools put in only two hours of extra labour a day. In the present case, they attend six hours of school and remain awake for 16 to 18 hours. There is no time to play or read since they are engaged in house work as well as wage work.

(6) *Nutrition status:* Discrimination in nutrition is in built into the girls' lives and has been accepted by them:

Nutritional Status	No of Girls	Per Cent	BMI
Severe malnutrition	1,352	72.96	less than 16
Moderate malnutrition	186	10.04	16 to 16.9
Mild malnutrition	183	9.88	17 to 18.4

(7) *Education*: 60 per cent girls will not be able to pursue education beyond upper primary school. This is sad because almost all of them like to attend the school and 66.13 per cent like school because they like to study. (Others may like it because of friends, better space and light than in their homes or rest from chores) Their lack of grasp of reality is reflected in their dreams and desires. 29.65 per cent (751) want to become doctors. They have not lost the ability to hope and dream. Almost 5 per cent fathers and 13 per cent mothers are illiterate. The rest are usually middle school dropouts and some are matriculates. A few fathers, usually from UP, are graduates.

Violence of experiencing powerlessness: Shelter permanency for these girls is sought in marriage. All men in the house, even younger brothers, can dictate to them. In effect the girls' lives are shaped by the experience of the power of others and their own powerlessness. It is so engraved in the lives of these girls that it is difficult for them and their families to perceive it as violence. This kind of violence does have long-lasting repercussions. None of these count as violence, yet it is devastating in its effect. Explicit violence, including sexual violence, is a tool used against women but this tool is effective only when it coexists and collaborates with this other kinds of violence.

Physical abuse: Most of the incidents and experiences of violence for these girls are indirect and not physical. Women and girls in general are the main focus. Physical and personal violence is a threat lurking round the corner for all women and girls.

We tried to raise the issue of unnecessary touching and attention by male teachers. The girls resented the behaviour of male teachers and they expressed their discomfiture to us. The principal of the school did not believe the girls. (Two municipal school teachers had been arrested for confinement of girl students and molestation while the school was on.) In another school girls said one of the teachers had been writing graffiti on the walls of the girls' toilets. We could not pursue the matter without making the girls more vulnerable. They did not want us to intervene. This is a complicated matter to handle.

Growing up as urban poor: The harsh life of these girls is worsened due to globalisation and changes in government policy. With downsizing and economic recession there is increased unemployment. The number of self-employed in the market

has risen. Increased competition forces them to accept meagre returns. The cost of displacement for migrants to the city is high. The sense of uprooting felt by the minorities has increased manifold and communal tensions have reached unprecedented levels. The rise in insecurity in apparent and subterranean violence at all levels in the city has increased the girls' vulnerability.

Those who speak a language other than Marathi can more or less be considered a minority, either religious or regional. Marathi-medium students come predominantly from the lower castes and marginalised groups because the more dominant upper classes and castes send their girls to private schools.

One of the reasons for the high proportion of dropouts is the unavailability of regional language medium secondary schools within reasonable distance from their homes.

Returning to the village: "My father thinks I should get married. I also dream of getting married sometime in the future. I want to study up to the X standard. But we will be going back to our native place next year because the city is too expensive. My grandparents are alone in the village. I don't know how I will manage but I will try to study up to the X." This is a girl studying in the V standard in a municipal school whose father is a mill worker. The school is located in an area that was known for its working class population in the 1960s. Most of the mill workers are now out of jobs and the land is now being developed for housing for the well-off.

Politics of toilets: In Mumbai the gender politics of toilets has always played a crucial role in lives of women from the hutments. They cannot relieve themselves till it is dark because there are not sufficient toilets and they have to go out in the open. They cannot go alone in the dark because there is fear of being raped or molested; so they have to go collectively. There are not enough public toilets and so they have to hold from voiding for long periods resulting in long-term health problems. Pre-adolescent girls are not considered old enough to access paid facilities like adults. And children have to use open spaces. Denial of privacy and self-esteem thus starts in most of cases at an early age.

Needs of pre-adolescent girls: The low self-esteem and need to talk with adults as individuals were obvious when we in-

terviewed them. The girls gradually shed their shyness and relaxed. It was rewarding to watch this change.

Menstrual hygiene and menstrual taboos: A 10-year-old girl said that she did not know where her hometown was though she visited it every year. She has been brought up in Mumbai. She knows she is a Hindu but is unaware of her caste. Yet she knows something about menstruation. What she knows is that when her mother is menstruating she is considered polluted and strict segregation has to be observed.

Menstruation and menstrual hygiene is also an area where women are kept under pressure all through their lives. It is reflected in taboos and sanctions. Most of the south Indian groups celebrate the onset of menstruation. It is an important experience in the lives of most of the girls from Tamil and Telugu medium schools. Observance of traditional beliefs along with lack of scientific knowledge and hygiene lead to health problems as well as to negative concepts of womanhood and fertility.

Crucial issue is self-esteem: We feel that the central issue is that of self-esteem. We can help the girls acquire respect for themselves and an ability to enjoy life that comes from being comfortable with one's self. It is heartening that though they may have lost much of their childhood they have not lost their mischievousness and their spirit which endure through their loss of childhood. Apart from their perceptions and insights, our interaction with them gave us back something of our own girlhood. We have been trying to do something in return. Our activities with them are diverse but all are woven around developing a sense of identity and self-esteem through enjoyable activities.

Action Programme

Some of the major outcomes of our individual interaction formed the basis of the action aspect of the research. To quote Jean Dreze, "My point is that the value of scientific research can, in many circumstances, be enhanced even further if it is combined with real-world involvement and action. I see this approach as an essential complement of, not a substitute for, research of a more 'detached' kind" [Dreze 2002].

Further, "the methodological requirements of action-based research deserve

further thinking. In many respects the standard research methods would apply, but there is also room for innovative principles such as the virtue of simplicity, the value of personal experience as a source of knowledge, and the need to see 'debate' as part of the research enterprise. The flourishing of action-based research could also pave the way for a healthy 'democratisation' of scientific research. In the social sciences particularly, I see no need for research to remain confined to the ivory tower of academia. Indeed, wider public participation could significantly enrich the entire process. In this respect, once again, research and action belong to a common cause" [Dreze 2002].

Kishori diaries: We created and disseminated low priced Kishori individualised diaries. The diaries contain the girls' photographs and names, and details of their address, birth dates, etc, details they often did not know. The diaries gave them an identity that would be precious to them. The diaries contain information on their bodies, tips about health and diet, songs of girlhood, evocative slogans and blank space for them to write what they want.

Kishori mela: A 'mela' (fair) was organised. Though it focused on health and education, it was made into a fun place where the girls could learn without imposed discipline. Once they entered the 'mela' they were free to roam about and explore things. The 'mela' was one way of caring for them, of letting them know they were important individuals for us. Four mini 'melas' were also held in different schools in the city.

Health awareness modules: Three simple health awareness modules were developed. These centred on the girls' knowledge of self and surroundings. The modules were based on our research findings. A major concern was that besides the gaps in their knowledge and their low self-esteem, as many as 60 per cent would leave the school system after class VII. The curricular modules with enriched content therefore should be introduced before they leave school. We developed modules with charts, games, participatory interactions, exercises, and live interaction with multiple resources and persons.

The first module addresses self-identity in relation to city, country and neighbouring countries. Map drawing and map reading are included as an exercise in the course of confirming this identity. Details of postal communication and cre-

ating awareness about various communication forms accessible to them are also included.

The second module is about communicating with one's own body and doing away with some common myths and fears. The module is about knowing one's body as a co-coordinated interdependent system and experiencing its physical space by various overlapping and reinforcing means like yoga exercises, charts and their daily activities at a glance. This helped girls open out on menstruation and its taboos with simple explanations about menstruation and importance of hygiene. They worked in groups to complete body charts with internal organs and systems emerging as layers. This module became very popular.

The third module is aimed at discussing ideas and developing verbal expression. They learnt to use dictionaries which they greatly enjoyed. This would help them use telephone directories, voters' lists, etc, in future.

There were a number of encouraging results. We could help them overcome their shyness about discussing menstruation and fertility. The module of self-identity in terms of city and country was a novel experience and they enjoyed it the most. They appreciated the approach we had taken to help them to know the functions of the body and one's relationship with it.

The curricular modules are to be developed further and attempts are being made

to introduce them within the municipal school system. A national consultation with concerned people from the field has already taken place and dissemination of findings with different sections like women's groups, people's health groups, teachers and parents was organised. We also created advocacy material for highlighting issues pertaining to girls in this age-group with government and non-government bodies.

Vacha is at present in the process of evolving a mobile resource centre for pre-adolescent girls from poor families. [EPW](#)

[Vacha Women's Resource Centre opened a library on women's issues in 1987. It has been producing cultural resources like music and videos. Its research and training programmes focus on marginalised and invisibilised women and girls and its children's centre prioritises girls in municipal schools. This note reflects the experience of the research and action team for project Bal Kishori.]

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