

# What Is Missing in Girls' Empowerment?

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Addressing gender disparity in education goes beyond increasing the presence of girls in school. It involves the removal of deep mental blocks that bind them to limited traditional roles. This article, while discussing the functioning of the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya highlights the problems impeding girls' overall development. If the KGBV is to be given a second chance for mainstreaming rural girls belonging to deprived social backgrounds, it needs to set right certain shortcomings.

Removal of gender disparity is not merely a function of the physical presence of girls inside school boundary walls. What matters is the range and rigour of learning experiences and forms of knowledge made available to girls in the process of schooling, so that they develop the confidence and the skills to shape their destiny and participate in the governance of society. This is the toughest challenge in the context of girls' education.

It demands overcoming the deep mental blocks in the adult mind about girls' efficiency and capacity to participate in the economic workforce as decision-makers. Mental blocks are so deep and pervasive that they have acquired a psycho-social base in the culture. These mental blocks function in a subtle manner and surface in every small or major decision taken in the process of learning, even in the case of girls who reach the school and survive it. The so-called softer options of the school curriculum, namely humanities, social sciences, home science and languages, remain the orbit of girls' choices. Serious engagement with mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology and their laboratories remain far away from most girls' mental world, even if a few girls do manage to enrol in the science stream. Similarly in other curricular areas girls' choice is often limited to dance and singing as compared to sports which demand physical expansion of oneself.

Education is a process of personal development in which adult expectations play a critical role in making the young aspire for a specific role. Parents' and teachers' expectations from girls are minuscule in comparison to what is expected of boys. Aspirations from the process of education per se are generally limited to making girls suitable for matrimony in accordance with the community's values. Once girls internalise these expectations, during the process of growing up, they become mental

blocks. These blocks impede the growth of a "self" in girls and prevent them from feeling an agency to choose their own goals. These mental blocks are no less a challenge in education than is acquisition of knowledge and skills necessary to participate in the modern economy. Only a sustained process of intellectually stimulating classroom pedagogy, applied in the context of knowledge spread across science, mathematics and the social sciences, can enable girls to transcend the origins of their mental blocks after identifying them. And only a sustained rigour in the school curriculum can make what is popularly known as an "empowered girl" who is capable of recognising her potential and who aspires for a productive life, not limited to traditional roles offered by our society.

## Symbolic Minimalism

The need to empower girls has been recognised, however vaguely, by the current educational policy, resulting in almost a flood of programmes which aim at empowering them. Several of these programmes treat empowerment as a one-shot measure. Distributions of bicycles or computers to girls who successfully complete a stage of education are examples of this type. Compared to a sustained effort for improving the quality of teaching in girls' schools, distribution of bicycles and computers is easier to manage. Their importance and role in widening personal capacity cannot be denied, but small steps of this kind are hardly adequate to address the nature and scale of the issues that educational planning faces in the context of gender relations. The expenditure incurred on bicycle or cash distribution should also be viewed against the backdrop of the cultural oppression of girls and their general educational deprivation, which includes discrimination against them in the context of fundamental needs like food and medical treatment during childhood and adolescence.

Contextualised in this manner, distribution of mechanical devices cannot be distinguished from other token steps like provision of scholarships, monthly bank deposits and fee waivers, and distribution of school uniforms and textbooks. We are forced to see all such measures, howsoever

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laudable the intention behind them, as instances of symbolic minimalism. Neither the nature nor the scale of the problem they are supposed to address justifies much optimism about their efficacy. There are several functional schemes planned in order to lay emphasis on girls' education. The National Programme of Education for Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL) is one such scheme which is being implemented in 61 educationally backward blocks of 21 districts. The programme, launched in September 2003, provides additional components for education of girls at the elementary stage, especially from disadvantaged communities, such as the development of a model upper-primary school in each cluster. It offers material incentives such as stationery, and introduces additional interventions like awards, remedial teaching, and bridge courses. These and components of NPEGEL are indistinct from what Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) programmes generally have. It looks like a loosely packaged bag in which ideas have been clubbed without any consolidated vision.

### KGBV Scheme

One exception in the scenario of girls' education is the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) scheme which is running under the SSA and accounts for about 7 per cent of its total outlay. The basic idea underpinning the scheme is to give a second chance for mainstreaming rural girls belonging to deprived social backgrounds who could not study up to or beyond class v. The second opportunity consists of the facility to stay in a hostel while studying for the upper primary stage of elementary education, namely classes vi to viii. The KGBV scheme draws its legitimacy from the thrust in national policy documents and international discourses on the "gender gap". Following this thrust, the scheme has been implemented in educationally backward blocks with a wider gender gap. The social categories covered are the scheduled castes (SC), scheduled tribes (ST), other backward classes (OBC), religious minorities, and below poverty line (BPL) households. The scheme offers three models, the first consisting of a hostel-cum-school for 100 girls, the second providing the same for 50 girls, and the third

offering only a 50-seat hostel attached to an existing upper primary school. As all the girls are primary school "dropouts", they are above 10 years of age and mostly in their teens. Enrolment requires mobilisation among families of the designated eligible groups.

The KGBV scheme is being implemented currently in 20 states, with considerable variation in style and quality. There is significant variation, for example, between KGBVs run directly by the SSA functionaries and by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), including the Mahila Samakhya (MS). Current figures indicate that more than 1,00,000 girls are studying in some 2,000 KGBVs across the country. Our interaction with NGOs and MS members involved in KGBVs in two states reveals a heartening reality, namely that parents appreciate the progress their daughters make, contrary to the prevalent view that the rural poor do not want to educate their daughters. Once enrolled at a KGBV, the girls go through a bridge course which attempts to cover the knowledge and skills required for negotiating the class vi curriculum. Although there is a considerable variety in the length and content of the bridge course offered in different parts of the country, most of them include components that have been neglected in the curricula of most states. Packaged under labels like "life skills", such components

offer empowerment strategies, such as personal development, communication capacity and health-related awareness.

### Accomplishments

Uttar Pradesh (UP) which ranks among India's highest "gender-gap" states is projected to have more than 700 KGBVs out of which 188 are already functioning. Out of the 27 KGBVs assigned so far to MS, we have personally visited five. Our experience corroborates the point made by SSA's monitoring teams, namely that MS-run KGBVs in UP have made several special accomplishments which can be attributed to the larger and longer story of the success of MS in mobilising rural women for legal and economic intervention. Both in the selection of teachers and in their orientation, the MS-run KGBVs have displayed the energy generated by MS itself as a state-supported NGO. Our impression is that this conjunction of energies is not entirely unique to MS; nor do MS-run KGBV in some other states necessarily provide the kind of outstanding example they do in UP. We feel that feminism as a social force and ideology has permitted several NGOs to invest somewhat unusual energies in KGBVs in quite a few cases. Such energies, of which the MS-run KGBVs in UP are perhaps the best example, find expression in the empowerment aspects of the curriculum. These aspects are more noticeable or

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visible than the girls' academic or scholastic accomplishments. And this is where a significant conceptual gap lies in the KGBV scheme, which needs to be observed and filled up with improved policy and funding.

The special effort made by KGBVs is in terms of giving focused attention to girls' education. However, the scheme operates in an unchanged climate of state curricular policy and poor-quality textbooks. The National Curriculum Framework-2005 is yet to be implemented in most states which means that the problem of disassociation between school knowledge and learners' life and needs is just as visible in the KGBVs as it is in any other school. The dull and stifling learning environment and an unnecessarily burdensome syllabus compounded by poor-quality teaching lead to the phenomenon of a high dropout rate during primary classes which has necessitated the KGBV scheme. The KGBVs end up using the same curricula which has no vision or understanding of girls' life and the role of education in their growth.

### Planning and Provision

The presence of the KGBV scheme in what can only be called a jungle of unstrung, state charities does convey that the problems faced by the poorest rural girls in availing education has been recognised as being distinct. However, its conceptualisation and budgetary planning have serious limitations. In order to identify these limitations, we decided to compare the KGBV budgeting with those made for the Navodaya Vidyalaya (NV) scheme which started in the 1980s and has now fully stabilised. We are aware that this comparison might look unreasonable, given the fact that NVs cater to rural children who have been selected in an open competition for a richly financed government-run "public" school, whereas KGBVs are meant for primary school "drop-outs". Our rationale for the comparison we are making is twofold. First, KGBV girls can be deemed to have been denied a chance to participate in the NV contest for admission. The denial deserves to be understood both in terms of the socio-cultural world from which these girls come and also with reference to the system's apathy towards their fate.

Secondly, a comparison between KGBV and NV schemes has the methodological potential for highlighting how educational policy deals with the varied spectrum of capacities in a rural society to avail state provision. The table gives the KGBV budget along with NV budgets and planning heads.

### Drawbacks

It is evident from the table that the KGBV schools not only receive less money under every head, but also that there are several items for which there is no provision at all. For example, laboratory equipment, school uniform and woollens are not provided to the KGBVs. The details mentioned in the column for NVs convey the extent of meticulous planning exercised to estimate a growing child's needs. Provision of travel expense to take a child to the hospital in case of emergency and the mention of items like woollen and cotton socks draw our attention to the fact that there is comprehensive understanding of a child's life in a residential school. This aspect seems to be completely missing from the planning of KGBVs despite the fact that it is a scheme for girls from deprived backgrounds whose needs are far greater than those of NV children, belonging largely to the elite strata of rural society. The teachers serving in NVs are well qualified; they go through several in-service training programmes

and get a regular salary based on a central government scale. The Navodaya Vidyalaya Sangathan organises its in-service training programmes in collaboration with leading institutes of the country, such as Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Ahmedabad, Indian Council for Cultural Relations (CICR), Hyderabad, and National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), to name a few.

The KGBV teachers, on the other hand, are para-teachers with no stability: they get sporadic in-service training inputs which are mostly so generalised that they cannot be expected to enhance teachers' understanding of the girls' pedagogic and developmental requirements. Their salary structures are very poor and do not have any routine benefits available to encadred regular government schoolteachers. They are supposed to share the responsibilities of looking after children's welfare after teaching is over for the day, but no living accommodation is provided to them. Four or five teachers live in a room which is converted into a staff room during the day. The crowded dormitories in which the girls sleep are similarly converted into classrooms during the day.

This rather depressing reality of the KGBV scheme is not unusual. Most schemes aimed at children belonging to the poor sections of society have a minimalist

**Table: KGBV and NVs Budgets**

Budget Head	KGBV School with Hostel for 100 Girls and Staff (Sanctioned Amount)	NVs (240 Students and Staff) (Sanctioned Amount)
Construction	Rs 38,75,000 building+ boundary wall+ boring/hand pump, electricity. Unit cost: Rs 38,750.	Rs 12,00,00,000 in two phases 14 classrooms, library, staff room, principal and vice principal's rooms, labs, three dorms, 23 teachers' quarters, kitchen and dining hall, playfield, water, sewerage, electricity, internal road. Unit cost: Rs 5,00,000.
Equipment	Rs 3,00,000 furniture and kitchen equipment.	Rs 6,75,000 furniture, laboratory-equipment, other equipments.
Bedding	Non-recurring: Rs 75,000 recurring: Rs 40,000 (details are not given). Unit cost: Rs 400.	Non-recurring: Rs 1,29,600 recurring: Rs 1,56,000 mattress, quilt, bed sheets, pillow, pillow cover, khes, mosquito net, two towels. Unit cost: Rs 650.
School uniform	No separate provision.	Summer – unit cost : Rs 1,250 Winter – unit cost: Rs 1,550.
Maintenance	Rs 40,000 pa (details are not given). Unit cost: Rs 400.	Rs 1,56,000 pa bathing and washing soaps, tooth paste, tooth brush, shoe polish, hair cutting, washing and ironing, hair oil. Unit cost: Rs 650
Medical care/ contingencies	Rs 75,000 pa no provision for a doctor (details are not given) unit cost: Rs 750.	Rs 2,54,800 pa medical expenses, TA expenses and a doctor for nine months. Unit cost: Rs 1,117

The figures in this table have been calculated on the basis of annual report of Navodaya Vidyalaya Samiti, 2006-07 and Revised Guidelines for Implementation of KGBVs with effect from April 1, 2008, issued by the ministry of human resource and development.

orientation. Their design reflects such a drastic lack of estimation of the basic necessities of life that they seem no better than acts of organised charity. The recipients are assumed to be satisfied with whatever is given. The compromises inherent in the design of the KGBV scheme are sharp indeed. Hygiene and good health, for example, constitute a focus for the scheme, but many KGBVs manage with three-five toilets for 80-100 young girls. The scheme's planning lacks any professional understanding of girls as human beings and as learners.

The greatest policy gap in the KGBV scheme lies in its indifference to pedagogic issues. This is evident even in the best instances of institutional efficiency. The provision made for teachers and other academic resources is not in tandem with the goal of providing a second substantial chance to rural girls from the most oppressed sections of society. The scheme is based on the assumption that the girls are capable of negotiating their accumulated individual deprivation of resources and formal learning. Between the assumption and the provision lies a great policy paradox.

### Systemic Crisis

For achieving its full potential, the KGBV scheme requires a large number of competent and sensitive teachers capable of doing justice to the upper-primary stage curricula in all areas of knowledge. Teaching at a KGBV must compensate for the educational deprivation suffered by students during their formative years of childhood. The term "competent" refers to the teacher's ability to deal with knowledge at the upper primary level, and the term "sensitive" refers to the teacher's awareness, stance and ability in the context of rural deprivation and gender issues, especially as they pertain to teenage girls. Though the dearth of good science and mathematics teachers is widely recognised, the problem of teachers who can teach English and the social sciences (covering history, geography and socio-political life – erstwhile civics) is equally serious. Unfortunately, in the context of girls' education, social sciences tend to be viewed narrowly from the viewpoint of gender empowerment alone, rather than in the larger perspective

of the need for academic rigour in all subjects. This is true for KGBVs also. The reports submitted by SSA's national monitoring teams or missions have underlined the need to find competent and sensitive teachers as a critical requirement.

The rapid expansion of the system of school education under the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and later on under SSA has revealed and exacerbated the supply-side crisis in teacher availability, quality and training across the nation. Policy response has heavily leaned on help from a few individuals and NGOs – a category covering a vast gamut of voluntary and donor-generated efforts. Very few NGOs have been able to set either examples or standards of institutionalised capacity. On the other hand, the formally institutionalised capacity for teacher education in which state funds are invested on a long-term basis has not given evidence of any significant enhancement of quality in response to the rapid expansion of the school system. Indeed there is sufficient evidence to say that institutions of teacher education have remained stagnant and isolated from the developments that have taken place under programmes like DPEP and SSA. Teacher-training related needs of the KGBV scheme have received support both from NGOs and District Institutes of the Education

and Training (DIET), and neither support appears to have proved satisfactory. To say that the inadequacy is mainly in a few subjects is to ignore the larger trivialisation of the concept of teaching and professionalism in teacher training in the shadow of terms like "teacher empowerment" and "joyful learning".

While both the presently available resources for KGBVs, namely NGOs and DIETs, deserve continued attention, we also need to look at an untapped resource for augmenting teacher capacity in KGBVs. This resource lies in universities and colleges, not just in their departments of teacher education but in other relevant departments as well. This resource lies unutilised in all parts of India although, more than 40 years ago, the Kothari Commission had visualised a major role for universities in strengthening school education by providing support to school-teachers in all subjects of the curriculum. A beginning along the lines of this recommendation can be made in the context of KGBVs.

### Complexities

The KGBV has been viewed as a stopover scheme to achieve universalisation of elementary education. The logic behind such a view is as simplistic as the wider perception that SSA has nearly achieved its

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goal of bringing all children to school and that the additional teachers hired under SSA are now being trained in all the states to achieve the next goal of high retention and learner achievement. This kind of perception misses the complexity of girls' education and its links with class, caste and religion-specific cultural factors operating in girls' lives. An educational opportunity cannot be limited to bringing girls to a school and keeping them there. The aim of education in a democracy is to enable all children to realise their right to participate in governance as sensitive and responsible citizens who are also capable of shaping their personal destiny. This is a difficult aim to achieve for all children who come from dalit, tribal, minority and other groups among the poor. For girls belonging to these groups, every battle is twofold. They not only have to face the community's general deprivation, they also have to fight the negative and suppressive forces which every girl faces in our society. Any serious effort to empower girls from oppressed rural backgrounds must enable them to fight both these battles effectively. To be made conscious of discriminatory practices and exploitation is hardly enough. Policymakers and providers of education must see it as the only catalyst of processes capable of breaking the cycle of oppression. This would require not merely an empowering ethos but substantial learning designed to cover the full spectrum of curricular choices.

The "second chance" given to KGBV girls will mean little if the system fails to give them the necessary skills, tools and psycho-social habits required to sustain empowerment. In the absence of a rigorous academic training, their freshly built self-esteem could get a traumatic jolt when they fail to succeed in the contest for upward mobility and status.

### Needless Doubts

A concern is sometimes expressed that a concentration of girls from SCs, STs, minorities and backward classes leads to the formation of a ghetto. This argument needs careful analysis. One wonders if 80-100 girls living together just for a few years can make a ghetto and if so what its harmful effects might be. The use of the

term ghetto is probably not correct here. The term is used figuratively to indicate geographic areas with a concentration of a particular type of people. Its classic meaning refers to a section of a city occupied by a minority group whose members live there, especially because of social, economic, or legal pressure. The composition of KGBVs indicates that the students' background is rather diverse except for the common element of poverty. Girls from SCs, STs, OBCs and religious minorities are 75 per cent of a KGBV enrolment while 25 per cent are from the general category of BPL families. If we carefully look at the demographic profile of KGBV students, we realise that they already have a vast resource of diverse experiences. There are several communities within the large umbrella term of SCs. Similarly the differences in tribal groups of the same area are a demographically accepted fact. The cultural beliefs of religious minorities are greatly different from other two groups. The inherent plurality of OBCs is evident from the term and it indicates diversity in the experiences of the girls coming from that background.

The idea of bringing girls to a residential educational setting, far away from their homes is challenged by many for having an alienating effect on KGBV students. Doubts are raised about their ability to adjust in their original settings when they go back. These doubts acquire a distinct meaning in the case of girls, especially the poorest girls. This argument should be weighed against the purpose of educating rural girls. Education is meant to enable them to distance themselves from social practices which are not only morally reprehensible but are also illegal. Child marriage is one such practice. Withdrawing girls from their homes may be a good option if it gives them the sole opportunity of travelling, interacting and being with others, which is by itself a big educative experience, while it also keeps them away from becoming potential cases of child marriage. The experience of being away from home for three years is indeed capable of giving them the confidence to be on their own; something the family, even in an urban setting, rarely imparts to girls. The dominant mode of socialisation in the family is to teach girls

to be dependent all the time. Policy debates on the implications of "hostelling" at an impressionable age have a considerable history, and the KGBVs are but the latest instance of efforts to equalise educational opportunity for children whose social setting is riddled with disadvantages.

### Future of KGBV

Like some other earlier schemes, the KGBVs also face the question of their beneficiaries' future. If the scheme is aimed at enhancing the equality of educational opportunity, then it must recognise that class VIII can hardly be a suitable terminal point. Nor is it from the perspective of psychological maturation. As a unique and unprecedented scheme covering the compounded disadvantages that rural girls from deprived socio-economic backgrounds suffer, it needs to be recast more ambitiously, with a long-term vision, which goes beyond ideas like "hand-holding" and offers a solid educational grounding to a highly vulnerable clientele. The example set by MS in UP, where a passionate sense of responsibility towards KGBVs appears to have developed, deserves to be given a more realistic chance to flourish in the context of not just upgradation of KGBVs to classes X or XII but also in terms of MS' own institutionalisation.

From the perspective of the girls enrolled in KGBVs, the benefits inherent in the scheme need to be viewed not just in the context of the right to education but also from the larger perspective of the right to life. This is so because the space available for rural girls from deprived backgrounds is narrow, not merely in terms of educational opportunity but also culturally, in the context of family, caste and social hierarchy. For instances the obstacles that SC and Muslim girls must overcome in order to realise their basic potential for school education are far too complex to be

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negotiated with sporadic empowerment strategies alone. They need an all-round education of competitive quality.

**An Innovative Scheme**

The KGBV scheme represents an innovation inasmuch as it attempts to bring back into the system a set of students who were earlier eliminated by it. The fact that India needs KGBVs in its present stage of systemic development shows that new capacities must be developed in order to enable the system to serve the goals of what is, historically, an unprecedented situation, arising out of the struggle for universalising educational opportunity. As we have indicated earlier the NV scheme provides a natural context in which KGBVs can be viewed. Rural children who can compete in an unscaffolded or open contest at the age of 11 clearly do not belong to the vulnerable sections of society. The KGBV girls are precisely in this category. They need to be seen as children whose opportunity to compete for NVs is currently curtailed by two social facts: one, they are from highly oppressed sections of society, and two, they


are girls. It is the compounded effect of these two social facts that makes them ineligible for the contest organised to admit 80 children in every district for the lone NV that serves the policy under which NVs were set up. If this line of argument is correct, then KGBVs need to be viewed as an institutional corrective or complementary means to enable NVs to expand as a legitimate institutional mechanism to serve the goals of equity and social justice. The vast gap between the resources invested in NVs and KGBVs has little justification from this perspective.

The agenda of education for SC rural girls cannot be adequately drawn without taking note of the historically accumulated deprivation and institutionalised hegemony they face. A brief educational experience focused on "rights" cannot provide more than a token relief. An academically sound curriculum with a strong institutional linkage with the larger system is necessary for KGBVs if the girls studying there are to be prevented from returning to the trap awaiting them after class VIII, whether they continue in the mainstream

system (which had forced them out earlier) or discontinue formal education.

The NV umbrella for KGBVs offers the promise of creating a model of girls' education from SC and other deprived backgrounds. Now that a decision has been taken to start 6,000 model secondary schools with central assistance under the Eleventh Five-Year Plan, one KGBV in every district should be upgraded to the level of a higher secondary school and administered by the Navodaya Vidyalaya Samiti. In the first phase, i.e., in 2008-09, educationally backward districts with a higher proportion of minorities and SC population can be selected. Over the Eleventh Five-Year Plan period, all the districts can be covered.

The KGBV is indeed a timely effort to address the accumulated problems arising out of systemic anomalies and cultural barriers impeding girls' development. The scheme carries the name and legacy of a woman who confronted several fundamental issues in a conservative social order. In order to continue to do justice to its association with Kasturba Gandhi, a far superior, confident planning and funding are required.



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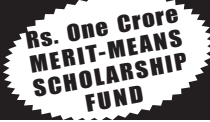
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