



Girls' Education - Causes for Dropout of Adolescents

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Many states in India have made impressive strides to ensure that children, especially girls, go to school and stay there for as long as possible. In Karnataka, thousands of socially vulnerable girls study at the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) residential schools in over 70 taluks, 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. But is this sufficient? Why do girls continue to drop out of school?

Recent research shows that in Karnataka over 30% of girls are 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.

A recent real-life case study, in Bangalore city 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 vis-à-vis the attitudes of the government and legal system.

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 slim and exceptionally tall for her age. She caught the eye of a 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 doing his homework. He played with other 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 and lunch basket, 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 off 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 had different plans. She herself had been married at 13 and had never been to school, so she wanted her daughter to be a teacher. But with an alcoholic husband who demanded money for drink in addition to her having to support the family, she had little option but to go to work regularly. Geetha's younger brother studied well and was regular to school. His mother 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. Her mother discovered the bag. All hell broke loose. Both were beaten black and blue by her father. Local opinion suggested that since the “girl’s name was spoiled”, 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 course, to the delight of the whole family, a healthy baby was born after a high-risk delivery in a big government hospital.

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.

The girl’s mother told me, “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 the mother 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 have informal residential facilities, including schooling, being run by the Mahila Samakhya Karnataka for women and girls at risk. The mother, 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 the case, 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 her mother 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 the mother called. “Akka, 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 looking for her, and demanding to be reunited. The situation may turn volatile if he decides to aggressively pursue her, especially as the child is still in the vicinity.

What issues militated against Geetha’s uninterrupted schooling?

Clearly, many cultural 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. This is a key reason for families to stop their daughters from school after puberty.

The second factor is the socialization which prepares girls for marriage, not for careers or higher education, from infancy. Social pressure on parents to get the girl married, premium on the virginity of the girl at the time of marriage and the lack of protection to the girl from sexual exploitation in her locality is another big driver of girl-child dropout and early marriage. Girls from poor, SC/ST or minority families, are at higher risk because perpetrators do not fear action from the police which does not take action on complaints filed by these sections. So the families keep their girls at home and groom them for domesticity to the exclusion of any other options.

Young men feel it is their prerogative to aggressively pursue any girl they take a fancy to especially from the poorer sections and families tacitly support this behavior through weak controls over his behaviour, and use this to encourage marriage even if the parties are underage. This is reinforced by popular films in Kannada and Telugu, 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 males are also depicted as either academic underachievers or as being from the working class, bringing the stories close to the lived experiences of the young male target 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 especially in rural North Karnataka, where there is strong social sanction and support. The government cannot be absolved of responsibility due to weak information dissemination against the practice and its poor implementation of the law due to lack of political will. It is hardly known that early marriage is outlawed and perpetrators liable for punishment. Officials often do not take action for fear of community backlash, or because even they do not believe in preventing child marriage.

Thus poverty, gender discrimination, unimplemented legal frameworks, community norms including those for (gendered) masculine behaviour, 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 the progress made to change this attitude is slow.

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 in terms of 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? 'The persistent patriarchal norms and increased influence of misogyny in Indian society, combined with neoliberal economic policies, causing an all-pervasive media influence, the breakdown of traditional behavioural trends, and withdrawal of state from the social sector are all part of the problem. A re-look at the educational policies which limit compulsory education to age 14, stronger implementation of girl-child friendly protective legislation to prevent child marriage, and greater public consciousness of gender-sensitive family norms would be the way forward.'

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