

Indian girls are challenging the rest of the world to keep pace

 [livemint.com/opinion/online-views/indian-girls-are-challenging-the-rest-of-the-world-to-keep-pace-11701875700998.html](https://www.livemint.com/opinion/online-views/indian-girls-are-challenging-the-rest-of-the-world-to-keep-pace-11701875700998.html)

December 7, 2023

What do girls want? Not girls whose families have access to newspapers like this, but average Indians. Most of the 1.4 billion. From high mountains to the coasts, from desert dunes to the riverine islands, from jungles to the dusty fertile smoky plains, and in the slums of metropolises and gali-koochas of the kasbas.

On a small island in a giant river, and a thousand and five hundred kilometres from there, in a dense jungle on a tiny hill, when I asked this very question, "What do you want?", the responses were identical. "We want to dance," and then they asked me to play Jhoome Jo Pathaan on my phone and let loose with the pulsating rhythm.

Wherever there is opportunity, I ask this question of groups of girls and boys—those who are in class 9 or older. These boys and girls want many similar things. But across the country, there is greater commonality in what girls want. Common enough also are the shackles on their desires, which don't exist for boys. It is usually clearly expressed: "Will our families and community let us do all this?"

Girls want education: Never have I come across a girl who did not want to pursue the next higher level of education. Many boys just want to get out and do something else. But not girls. They want to go to a higher secondary school and then college. The distance to a college or higher secondary school is always a big concern for them. Distances of 5km to 10km are common. A cycle helps, but not always. The route may be too unsafe, or parents may just not like the idea of long-distance cycle rides. Out-of-pocket expenses, even when education itself is free, can become an obstacle. This thirst for education is a tidal force. Despite improvements, hundreds of thousands of girls are still forced to drop out each year. Girls outpace boys in enrolment at nearly every level of education, but it doesn't always translate to better opportunities.

Girls want jobs: They want greater independence, dignity and remuneration that comes from work. The large majority vociferously want jobs. From the remotest rural areas to the metros. They want to work outside their homes. The most common desires are to be doctors, nurses, teachers or government officers. Many want to join the police or the army; unsurprising, given what they must bear in their daily lives. In each group, you will find one or two who want to become a politician, singer, dancer, actor or sportsperson.

Girls want to have fun: The dance to Jhoome Jo Pathaan was not an oddity. Similar things happen in almost every group. They want to dance and sing. They want to travel and see the world, at least the district headquarters. They want to wear good clothes and put on make-up.

They must want other things too. But in a group, with someone like me present, they won't share everything. Education, jobs and fun—that's the chorus of girls across the country. Many of these aspirations are stoked by access to media through the internet, the like of which was not available even a few years ago. For example, a few decades ago, the aspiration to become an actor meant becoming Madhuri Dixit, which was obviously so far-fetched that it was out of the realm of possibility. Today being an actor has wider possibilities—one can be a performer on a YouTube channel popular in a local area. Becoming this person is far more relatable, and so can be aspired for. This is true of even the more 'mainstream' choices. They can see proximate examples of policewomen or officers who come from modest backgrounds and are relatable.

On a misty winter evening, a group of girls was pleading with me to get a secondary school opened in their village. Because the nearest one was 15km away, and while the boys took rooms on rent and lived near the school, girls were not allowed to and riding that distance every day in that terrain was impossible. So, they had to all drop out after class 8. When they understood that I was not a government officer, they wanted jobs, and if not that then "at least give us sewing machines".

In another part of the country, they had access to a school nearby, they were determined to go to college, and they had the confidence that they will get jobs. But they wanted some musical instruments for their band, so that they could turn professional in their region. One of them wanted to emulate Neeraj Chopra.

The dreams and hopes of girls are being fired up. But their unshackling from mores and prejudices is not keeping pace. Nor are the practical enablers of their desires—access to educational institutions, safe and secure infrastructure, adequate jobs of the kind they want, guidance and counselling on what to do, social support when required, and financial backing.

As aspirations are rising without the unshackling of societal norms and enablers of empowerment keeping pace, the chances of their fulfilment are less than what they used to be even two decades earlier. Yet, this increasing gap is a good thing because it is coming from new aspirations. Which is the last thing we should stymie. The girls of India are challenging the rest of the country to keep pace. We had better hurry because they are the future.