



Creating An Enabling Environment for Girls in Schools

Nirmala V G

Background

In Indian rural communities many adolescent girls are neglected and vulnerable. In most cases they are fed and brought up with the mindset that they are 'somebody else's wealth' and are considered to be burden on the family, to be given away with a dowry. Other societal myths also add to the feeling. Consequently, parental discrimination against the girl child triggers gender disparities in schooling. Hence, adult girls are not able to get the necessary knowledge and skills to advance and as a result they remain disempowered and face an extreme degree of pressure from peers, parents, society and their own lack of self confidence.

In this background, there is an immediate need for creating awareness about gender discrimination, life skills, nutrition and health and related issues. Young girls becoming responsible for these things reinforces the concept that self-confidence comes from making decisions. Being responsible for themselves as well as learning how to evaluate alternatives and make proper judgment is crucial in the life of these young adults. It is a difficult process but it is only through this awareness they can lead a dignified life.

Why Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBV schools)?

To overcome the above circumstances, girls need to develop self-confidence, to build up a positive self-image which will help them improve their decision-making skills and cope with the fear of failure. To aid this process, the Government of India has launched a new scheme for girls' education called "Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya". Under this scheme, residential schools with boarding facilities are provided at elementary level for girls who have dropped out of school in the age group of 11 to 14 years who predominantly belong to the SC, ST, OBC and minority communities in backward areas. The

objective is to ensure access to quality education to girls from disadvantaged groups of society. It also aims at increasing enrolment and reducing the dropout rate. At the primary level the emphasis is on the slightly older girls who dropped out of school and were unable to complete primary schooling. However, in difficult areas (migratory populations, scattered habitations that do not qualify for primary/upper primary schools) younger girls are also targeted at the upper primary level. The focus is on adolescent girls who are unable to go to regular schools. The girls might require bridge courses before mainstreaming them to KGBV schools as they were not enrolled / absent / dropped out of school in lower classes.

The primary objective of the KGBV schools is to develop an individual through a holistic approach by giving the required support in the areas of the teaching-learning process, teacher support and providing a supportive school/classroom environment along with facilitating the community participation. All these are aimed at improving the quality of education in KGBV schools.

However, there are some obstacles such as the traditional definition of gender, its impact on girls' roles in society and child marriages. These are big barriers to achieving expected results. Socio-economic and cultural reasons like customs, poverty in the communities further curtail the value of education for girls. In this context dropout rate of girls is high, as most of the families often subject them to hard labour in order to earn a supplementary income.

Girls face a variety of problems in getting higher secondary education. Some of these are - poverty, a lack of proper information channels, timely inputs and required resources on health related issues resulting in problems like general illness, anemia, micronutrient deficiencies and menstruation problems. Menstruation and menstrual practices are still clouded by socio-cultural restrictions resulting in adolescent girls remaining ignorant of the scientific facts of hygiene and related practices, which sometimes result in health disorders.

What the needs are

In the context of KGBV Schools the enabling environment means the provision of physical, psychological, social and emotional inputs to help these young girls grow and lead dignified, meaningful, productive and happy lives. This automatically requires better quality infrastructure such as proper classrooms, hostel rooms and functional toilets. These, along with adequate teaching-learning materials, play a crucial role in creating an enabling environment. Appropriate systems for providing necessary academic support and for evaluation and monitoring to motivate and prepare the girls and

their families to send them to residential school have also got to be put in place.

Curricular objectives need to connect with social values as well as their life realities which girls face outside the school as, for example, beginning with important aspects like scarcity of water and going right up to violence and other multiple challenges. The significant question is how the curriculum should be designed so that the social milieu and context of girls is addressed.

Teachers need to be educated by strategies that empower them to identify the hidden, discriminatory messages prevalent in their own practices. They can demonstrate the same during their day today communication and could be the role models for the girls understanding about equality and justice in classrooms. They can take initiatives in curricula and teaching practices that challenge patriarchal attitudes resulting in social inequalities that exist in the society they live. Teachers could also follow relevant teaching learning practices to address the advantages and disadvantages of these children's diverse socio-economic backgrounds at different learning levels.

Means to develop such environment

In collaboration with local groups, villages, volunteers, and international well-wishers, a new generation has to be trained who can work with communities of these children to bring change in their understanding about women education.

There is a need to adopt the gender sensitive approach to the KGBV schools. In this context NGOs entrusted with the responsibility of running the scheme need to be carefully selected. NGO teachers who work with communities should have the same socio-cultural- background, so that they understand the issues in a cohesive manner and get social acceptance. Their presence will help build a good rapport with the community, especially in imparting vocational skills, tackling problems related to health and nutrition, without losing sight of the objectives of the KGBV schools.

These girls also need sports and physical education support to build their confidence and

capabilities as it is needed the most in their real life circumstances. The Arts and Aesthetics could also be introduced in KGBV Schools to encourage them to explore their creativity as well as to build their new life with fresh explorations and experiments.

Some of the recommendations that could bring the desired changes in the future are listed below.

Awareness about menstrual hygiene

Educating adolescent girls in menstrual hygiene issue is very important factor in the KGBV schools. Appropriate training should include aspects of menstrual cleanliness, importance of usage and disposals of pads, reproductive tract infections etc.

Creation of a safe and friendly environment

A safe, friendly, personal and confidential school environment should be provided to the adolescent girls. These include facilities like adequate water, clean bathrooms, individual bedding and separate rooms so that personal hygiene is

ensured. Other important aspects are the organisation of health and counseling camps to support girls and emotionally and psychologically, particularly to help them take long-term decisions. Well-planned, regularly run health education programmes need to be designed and implemented as for a regular, intensive focus on child health and hygiene. Apart from these, nutritious food and yoga classes are essential for a sense of well-being

To conclude, enabling environments in the KGBV schools must include knowledge on health and hygiene issues since they are so important. Many of these require only friendly intervention from teachers and wardens. Privacy has to be ensured, as many problems arise from its lack. All findings reinforce the need to encourage safe and hygienic practices among adolescent girls and bring them out of misconceptions and restrictions regarding menstruation and related issues.

Nirmala is working as a Resource Person at Yadgir District Institute, Azim Premji Foundation, Karnataka, for the last one year. She is currently working with Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBV) for adolescent girls, in Yadgir district, focusing on health and hygiene. She has a Masters degree in Political Science from Karnatak University, Dharwad and Human Resource Management from Bangalore University. She has been working in the development sector for the last 12 years, in various domains including, Women and Child development, Health, Livelihood and Human Resource. She can be contacted at nirmala.vg@azimpemjifoundation.org

