

# Looking Beyond Panorama of Reaching Schools A Situational Analysis of School-going Adolescent Girls in Jammu (J&K)

\*VARSHA KAPOOR

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## Abstract

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*Reaching higher levels of education for Indian adolescent girls cannot be a panacea for their empowerment unless the various linked factors are taken care of. This paper critically articulates the impact of socio-cultural settings in getting quality education by adolescent girls in Jammu (India) through gender/empowerment approach. A division of higher secondary schools is made using quota sampling. Total sample is 300 from twelve schools (240 adolescent girls, 24 parents and 36 teachers). Focussed group discussions (FGDs), observations, questionnaires and structured interviews are the main tools used for data collection. Impact of various factors like socio-cultural environment, issues related to health, parents and teachers as agents of socialisation, safety issues, and decision-making power on getting quality education are analysed. The study emphasizes a holistic approach considering the socio-cultural realities in educational discourse.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In the discourse of empowerment of girls, education has always been given prime importance by the

policy-makers. Some of the commonly heard notions are, 'by educating girls, you can educate the whole family'; 'investing in girls' education

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\*Assistant Professor, Sociology, Higher Education Department, J&K

is the best investment'; 'send them to school to empower them'. The alternative/anti-thesis perspective to this is "why should girls only take the responsibility of the family in every aspect; why we still need to use the word 'investment' with educating a girl (investing for their dowry is not enough?). Most importantly, is going to school solve the purpose of her empowerment? Is it sufficing to put the girls in schools and enhance the literacy rate of a country by providing them with required grades to reach the next class? What about the societal constraints, safety issues and cultural norms?" With all these questions in mind, this research paper is an attempt to analyse the situation of school-going adolescent girls in India (J&K) who win the war of reaching the school at higher secondary level but still there are deeper issues which need to be addressed for their empowerment through quality of education.

Though numerous studies have been conducted in different parts of the world related to the access, enrolment in schools and dropout rate of girls (Bhatty, 1998; Kane, 2004). But, the issue whether the increased enrolment of girls in schools really empowers them, still needs deeper understanding and action.

Less attention is paid to the data related to impact of the learning environment in social milieu and problems faced by girls in acquiring the required quality education in India.

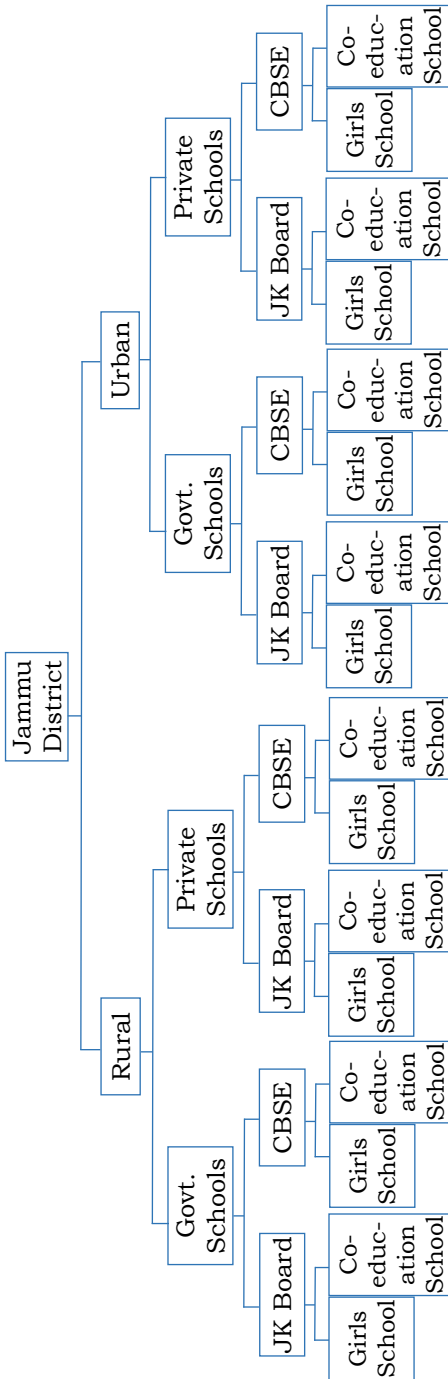
## **OBJECTIVES**

1. To understand how the concept of adolescence (especially in context of girls) in India differs from the western societies;
2. To critically highlight the issue that only reaching secondary schools and not considering the different learning environments cannot be the parameter for girl empowerment;
3. To analyse the situation and issues pertaining to adolescent girls studying in different school environments;
4. To comprehend the role of teachers and parents as agents of socialisation in adolescent girls' process of empowerment through education.
5. With these objectives, the present article articulates the impact of social setting in getting quality education by adolescent girls in various educational institutions in Jammu (India).

## **AREA OF STUDY**

The present study was undertaken in the district, Jammu. This is one of the important districts of the UT Jammu & Kashmir both in terms of education and its location. The district consists of 8 blocks and 4 tehsils. The district consists of a total number of 2414 schools. There are 64 J&K government higher secondary schools (Directorate of School Education Department, DSEJ, 2016). As per the list of private schools, the estimated

**Graph 1: Graphical Representation of Sample**



number of higher secondary schools is 200. Another important component of area selection was schools which follow Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) curriculum. There are around 40 CBSE higher secondary schools in Jammu district (government as well as private).

**PROCESS OF DATA COLLECTION**

**Process**

Keeping the objectives of the study in consideration, the design chosen for the present research was exploratory research design. All the higher secondary schools and the adolescent girls studying in them formed the population of the study. Schools were mainly divided based on rural and urban areas (within the municipal limits).

**TOOLS USED**

The present study is empirical and qualitative in nature based on both primary and secondary data. Observations, Questionnaires, and Focussed Group Discussions (FGDs) were the major tools of data collection. The primary data is based on the intensive fieldwork carried out in various higher secondary schools of Jammu district. The secondary sources used included various books, articles, journals, archives and sources available on the internet.

**SAMPLE**

From the complete list of higher secondary schools of both the boards (CBSE and State Board), a division

was made on the basis of rural and urban schools. Quotas were formed on the basis of co-education and single-sex schools, private and government schools, state board and CBSE (Central Board of School Education) affiliated schools finally making sixteen (16) categories (Graph-1).

It was realised during fieldwork that there was no school available as per the four categories chosen. So, the number of girls chosen from twelve (12) categories left was raised from 10 to 20 girls making an adolescent girl students' sample of 240 girls. Twenty-four teachers and 36 parents were also interviewed, making a total sample of 300.

### **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The perspective selected for the study was 'Empowerment Approach'. As per Kabeer (1999), empowerment has two primary constituents:

- **Resources**, including not only financial and productive assets, but opportunities, capabilities, social networks and other environmental factors; and
- **Agency**, or the ability to act in one's own best interest.

Taking this approach, different school environments are taken as 'Resources' and adolescent school going girls as taken as agency with the notion reinforced by many scholars that when girls and women go to school, or participate in a literacy programme, they not only acquire fundamental literacy skills and academic knowledge but they are

empowered to make key decisions and take charge of their lives (Martinez and Fernandez, 2009). In a similar manner, Murphy-Graham (2012) in '*Opening Minds, Improving Lives*' used the education-empowerment framework as an insightful way to think about empowerment in an educational context by linking recognition, capacity building and action.

### **DATA ANALYSES**

The actual interpretation of adolescence as a phase of life remains a social construct that differs between cultures. To comprehend the concerns related to adolescent school-going girls in India, the first objective of the study is to understand how the concept of adolescence in India itself differs from the definitions given by world forums. It was realised that the real state of girls can only be realised by considering their socio-cultural set-up peculiar to the Indian scenario. The factors like home environment, cultural values, and peer-group pressures have great impact on interpretation of adolescence (UNICEF, 2011). It was realised during review of literature that the girls in India cannot be studied with the common yardstick as in the West but by considering their socio-cultural environment peculiar to India.

### **ADOLESCENCE IN INDIA AND WEST: A COMPARISON**

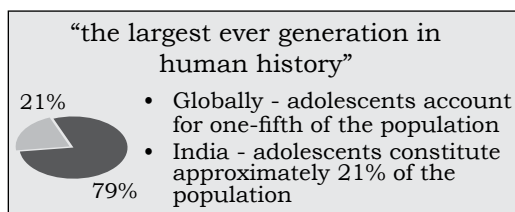
Focussing on the relevance of the concept of adolescence to the

Indian scenario, the term itself becomes questionable. As Indian society is marked by heterogeneity in its culture and essence, it is difficult to perceive adolescents as a homogenous group like in the West and replicate their models to understand the concepts. In Indian society, the concept of 'adolescence' is not viewed as an extended period of education and training for adult roles as in the West. There is limited scope of such experience in context of India. Reasons behind this limitation begins from factors such as a delay in the onset of puberty due to poor nutritional diet, prevalence of early marriage signifying adulthood to alarming crimes, safety issues and societal pressures. Furthermore, the concept of generation gap cited in Western societies does not exist in India (Greene and Walker, 1997). Nevertheless, gradually, with the changing economic and social profile and structures, generational differences in India are becoming increasingly visible and unavoidable. The association of adolescence with sexuality is another factor which increases resistance to the concept, particularly in regard to female adolescence (UNFPA, 2003).

### **ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN INDIA: SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS**

As per UN Inter Agency Working Group on Population and Development (2000), adolescents consist of 21 per cent of the total population in India (Chart 1).

**Chart 1: Population of Adolescents in India**



Source: UN Inter Agency Working Group on Population and Development (IAWG-P&D-2000)

According to National Youth Policy (2014), 21.4 per cent of the total population in India consists of adolescents. This age group is characterised by distinct physical and social changes, the separate health, education, economic and employment needs. Such needs of adolescents cannot be ignored and require measures specifically designed for their empowerment (UNICEF, 2011). The lack of information can be attributed to a shroud of silence and mystery. Thus, there is a need to pay attention to the requirements of this age group with special consideration to their different needs and situations like different school environment as formal schooling is considered a significant indicator of empowerment.

### **FORMAL SCHOOLING AS AGENT OF SOCIALISATION**

Education is an inseparable part of social structure and an important agent of socialisation (Gyekye, 1987). It helps not only to learn new ways but to unlearn certain wrong notions and perspectives which a child internalises from other informal agents. It has the

potential to contribute to alternative socialisation. It is only through the creation of minds ignited with rational thinking that the unequal power structure can be questioned and altered. Girls can come forward and can actively participate in the development of the country (Sen, 1999).

### **IMPACT OF SOCIAL FACTORS ON SCHOOL-GOING ADOLESCENT GIRLS**

As per the second objective of the study, it was realised that there is a need to pay attention to various problems girls face in India in getting quality education even after access to schools. A diverse country like India with major chunk of population living in rural areas, long distance from homes to schools especially secondary schools, which are more widely dispersed is one of the major hindrances in the way of providing good education to adolescent girls. They have to deal with a range of threats along the way. Unsafe societies create a fear of abduction, physical and sexual violence, harassment and abuse. Sometimes, even if they get admitted to schools, they remain absent due to lack of appropriate infrastructure and sanitary facilities

at schools (Bandyopadhyay and Subrahmanian, 2008). The duration of menstruation creates a fear of social stigma in the minds of adolescent girls, which also results in them missing several days of classes per month and falling behind. This irregular and fluctuating schooling creates major hurdles in acquiring knowledge. Some of the important issues related to girls' situation are analysed below.

### **ISSUES RELATED TO HEALTH**

'Quality Learners' is the first and foremost requirement of quality education (UNICEF, 2000). Taking the case of India, many girls are nutritionally vulnerable and lack proper diet due to poverty, discrimination and absence of adequate education regarding the importance of a balanced diet. They do not receive the attention they deserve and need. Many studies have analysed the minute incidences of inequality in day-to-day life where girls' meals (food, milk, fruits, etc.) are even compromised for their brothers and fathers (Trivedi, 2012).

Fever, cough, cold, body aches, etc., are the general indicators of

**Table 1**  
**Frequency of Girls Falling Sick in a Month**

<b>S.No.</b>	<b>Falling sick in a month</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
1.	Once	43	18
2.	Twice	124	51.66
3.	Weekly	35	14.6
4.	Never	38	15.8
<b>Total</b>		<b>240</b>	<b>100</b>

poor health. It was observed that according to more than 50 per cent of the girls, they fall sick twice in a month and only 15.8 per cent never fell ill in a month (Table 1).

The girls of both rural and urban areas fall sick equally showing no major difference. One of the girls from a rural government school asked innocently, “*maam, jo ek baar har mahine bimar hote hai uske ilava batana hai*”, in regional language (Do I have to answer other than one time I fall ill each month?). It was also observed during focussed group interviews that many of the girls perceive themselves as ill during the monthly menstrual period and many of them did not go to school during those days.

### **SAFETY ISSUES**

Physical or mental abuse plays a negative role in the process of empowerment of adolescent girls. 65 per cent of the girls marked that they never had any scaring experience while going to school or in the school, while 35 per cent agreed that they

had some bad experience. Although major ratio of girls did not have any scary instance to remember but still 35 per cent cannot be ignored either. Majority of girls who admitted that they suffered from some frightening incident belong to rural areas and were studying in co-educational institutes (Table 2).

More than half of the girls were reluctant to share any frightening experience but many of them have experienced something scary (eve-teasing, molestation, harassment, abuse, etc.). The ratio of rural girls studying in co-educational institutes in both private and government schools is greater than other girls who experienced it. It can be analysed that rural girls are more susceptible to such incidences due to the long distances they cover, lack of family support, lack of teachers who help build their confidence and lack of safety measures. It is also realised through observations and during FGDs that girls are hesitant to tell anyone about the trauma they went through. It is in line with

**Table 2**

#### **Issues Related to Safety**

<b>S. No.</b>	<b>Safety issues</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
1.	Long distance	66	27.5
2.	Behaviour of male/ female teachers	62	25.83
3.	No washrooms	44	18.33
4.	Poor infrastructure	23	9.58
5.	Inadequate transport facility	45	18.75
<b>Total</b>		<b>240</b>	<b>100</b>

many studies which show that many a times the girls become victim of people known to them. It can be some relative or a teacher, so they silently bear the suffering due to the fear of embarrassment in the society they live in. This is a major hindrance in the process of empowerment of girls.

### **PARENTS AS AGENTS OF SOCIALISATION**

Majority of the parents (70.83 per cent) replied that they strongly believe that girls should be given higher education, 12.5 per cent just agreed and there were four parents who disagreed that girls should be given higher education (Table 3).

According to them, secondary education is more than enough for the girls as they themselves never went to school. Some of them were afraid that they would not get a suitable match if the girl is over-qualified as the boys in their village are not highly qualified. Parents in urban areas are much more supportive than in rural areas.

The fear that sending girls to school could ruin a girl's and her family's reputation, emerged strongly

from the interviews with parents. It was pertinently visible that many parents are afraid that after their daughter reaches puberty, she might engage herself in love affairs and illicit relations especially on her way to school. They are scared that their daughter might engage in activities deemed unfitting within the cultural environment. This in turn could also ruin her marriage prospects and the families' reputation within the community. Leaving school was perceived as a viable solution to avoid this jeopardy. Thus, if parents felt that their daughter was treading the 'wrong path', this presented a socially acceptable reason to discontinue her education.

One of the girls studying in rural government school expressed during the FGD that she is good in studies and wanted to go to a good private school but her parents enrolled her in government school (considering the financial status) while at the same time, her two brothers were sent to private schools. Maximum parents, i.e., 83.33 per cent strongly

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agreed that girls should be educated in girls only schools. Given a choice they would always admit their daughters in the girls' schools. To their satisfaction, girls' schools are comparatively much safer places than co-education schools.

### **PRESSURE OF CHOOSING SOCIALLY APPROPRIATE SUBJECTS**

Although 86.66 per cent revealed that they got subjects of their choice but from observation and FGDS, it appeared that many teachers had a strong traditional stereotypical notion about gender identity (Table 4).

They were of the view that mathematics and science are masculine subject areas, as is technology. It is generally perceived that social sciences and languages are subjects which are more feminine in nature. This reflects the gendered aspect of curriculum. This biased attitude affects the career prospects of girls in a very intensive way. Due to this point of view, it is presumed that girls cannot do well in mathematics and technical subjects like computer education, Information Technology, etc. This notion also impacts girls' own perception of their ability in

a negative way and they become reluctant to choose such subjects.

### **TEACHERS AS AGENTS OF SOCIALISATION**

Teachers play the most crucial role in helping girls to fetch the real benefits of formal education. According to around half of the girls under study, they feel free and comfortable in asking subject related questions, their queries, sharing problems and issues related to studies and other aspects of life to only few teachers. For many girls, it is sometimes only one or two teachers in the whole school. It is also apprehended that girls are more comfortable in sharing their thoughts with female teachers. There is no major difference of opinion found in girls studying in different school environments.

It is important here to mention that when this question was read out to girls in some schools, many of them immediately uttered 'No' 'No'; then attempt was made to make them realise that discrimination is not always clearly visible and its dimension is not always too huge to be noticed always by everyone. After illustrations with few examples like boys being always motivated to go

**Table 4**  
**Forced to take Social Sciences**

<b>S.No.</b>	<b>Forced to take social sciences</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
1.	Yes	32	13.33
2.	No	208	86.66
<b>Total</b>		<b>240</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 5**  
**Discrimination/More Preference to Boys by Teachers**

S.No.	Discrimination/More preference to Boys by Teachers	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1.	Yes	123	51.25
2.	No	37	15.41
3.	NA	80	33.33
<b>Total</b>		<b>240</b>	<b>100</b>

for sports and girls for music, home science, etc., and few more, the girls were able to respond to the question. 51.25 per cent marked that they were discriminated at times by the teachers (the question was not applicable to 33.33 per cent girls studying in girls only school, Table 5).

Discrimination on the basis of being girls in schools is not always visible and concretely manifested to feel bad about it. At the same time, it is observed that societal norms and cultural values are so deeply imbibed in girls that the discriminatory behaviour is accepted as normal to them (Chanana, 2001). Although many of them accepted that they are always asked to perform gender segregated tasks and activities, but they are not aware of the outcomes of such attitude of teachers. Nevertheless, the present study is not in line with many studies showing discrimination in sitting arrangements in classrooms. No discrimination is found in sitting arrangements in the classrooms. However, girls in co-educational schools sit with girls and not with boys by choice. The major reason for

the same can be the internalisation of norms related to gender segregation in society. It can be analysed that many cultural attitudes and constraints that women experience as adults in society are difficult to escape even while in school given that teachers and administrators are themselves a product of those cultural attitudes and constraints.

#### **INFLUENCE OF CULTURAL NORMS**

Cultural norms play a major role in shaping the choices of adolescent girls. Violence is dangerous for everyone and especially for adolescent girls who are themselves going through the phase of physical and emotional changes. Understanding of violence and response to it varies from girl to girl in context of their cultural set-up, educational development and socio-economic conditions (Nambissan, 1996). Some girls narrated the incidents of raising their voice against injustice and violence during FGDs but the number was less. Some of them admitted that by doing so, people around them think that schools are providing incorrect motivation as raising voice

is not considered good for a girl's personality. People might think negatively which would ultimately affect their marriage prospects. Such thought process is impregnated with the deep-rooted gender bias in society where girls are constantly persuaded to tolerate the injustice as being normal and adjusting for their survival.

### **DECISION-MAKING: A SIGNIFICANT INDICATOR OF EMPOWERMENT**

It is realised that 78.33 per cent of girls did not feel that they had the capacity of take major decisions in their lives. They were dependent on others, mostly on parents especially their mothers for even the simplest decisions. 21.66 per cent girls responded that they could take many of their decisions on their own (Table 6).

Although female schooling at the secondary level is more consistently and strongly associated with increased decision-making, it is observed that maximum girls in all the schools feel that they are dependent on family and peer groups for their decisions and well-being. They are not confident enough to take petty

decisions as well as crucial decisions of their life ranging from what to wear, which activity to participate in school to which subject to choose. Many of them admitted that they choose the subjects because their friends are choosing the same and they want to be with them.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Perceptions play a vital role in deciding how women should be treated in a society which are themselves the product of cultural set-up. Various social realities are creating a hindrance in acquiring quality education by the girls. In India, major problem is not poverty but the disparity and wide gap between rich and poor. It is a country where many people can send their children to the best considered private schools and there are people who do not want to send their children, especially girls to schools even after the provision of free education. This dilemma needs to be focussed upon for sustainable development so that future generations would not be swinging in the same rope of inequality and curtailed justice.

**Table 6**

#### **Capability of Taking Decisions/Dependence on Others**

<b>S.No.</b>	<b>Capability of taking decisions/dependence on others</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
1.	Yes	52	21.66
2.	No	188	78.33
<b>Total</b>		<b>240</b>	<b>100</b>

Although gender stereotypes and discrepancies begin from an early age in one's life which are channelised through cultural norms and practices, they become more stringent during adolescence. It is the time when girls are often forced to contend with new restrictions and limitations on their freedom of movement.

Regarding parents, it can be analysed that parents' own experiences, perceptions and attitudes towards education and schooling have a significant impact on girl's education. Their educational status, financial status, locality, cultural set-up and thought-process play a major role in cementing their views regarding education of adolescent daughters.

It can also be inferred that many a times, teachers play a negative role rather than helping girls to eradicate inequalities which ultimately lead to disempowerment and discrimination. Gender stereotypes are constructed by teacher's attitudes, classroom atmosphere and learning approaches which are further reproduced by both teachers and students. For example, during FGDs, it was observed that according to girls, male and female teachers reproduce traditional male and female roles in the classroom. Many female teachers follow the '*supportive sympathetic*' archetype, whilst male teachers follow the 'authoritative' attitude. It is also observed that in most of the schools, there are different staff rooms for

male and female teachers. This trend is also reproducing the traditional gender segregation followed in most of the Indian families. Unequal educational outcomes provide a real threat to girl's empowerment and equality in society (UNESCO, 2015).

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

There is a need to pay attention to the requirements of this age group with special consideration to their different needs and situations. Solutions cannot be based on common benchmark as it is a heterogeneous group with different circumstances in rural and urban areas. It is recommended that any study pertaining to education of adolescent girls should consider the social environment in which they are living.

Teachers can play a major role in improving the life skills of girls. A discourse on education system is incomplete without understanding and articulating the key role played by teachers, especially in context of gender equality. Teachers can play a major role in transmitting the ideology, values, and culture of a nation, state, and its people. At the same time half-truths, wrong information and constricted learning behaviours that students internalise can also be filtered through teachers' lack of knowledge, misjudgements, or biases. Thus, educational reform must therefore emphasise the education and empowerment of teachers that includes the real opportunity for

them to share perspectives, power and decision-making.

Only making new policies and programs is not sufficient. The proper execution and strategy to make it ground reality is also necessary. Moreover, the problems of rural and urban area schools should not be measured by a common yardstick, since problems of rural area schools are more as compared to urban areas. Similarly, replicating policies from other parts of the world without considering the different context and conditions of the state and needs of girls would not solve the purpose.

## CONCLUSION

In the words of Winthrop and McGivney, it requires moving beyond the “*ambition from gender parity to a vision of success that better reflects what girls aspire to and deserve in their*

*lives*” (Winthrop and McGivney, 2015). Hence, there is a need to address the relationship between quality education as a resource and girls as agents of their own empowerment.

No reason or argument (cultural/social/economic) can justify abjuration of education to girls. It is a fundamental right of each girl around the world. Education is an important agent that can change the unjust societal structures and can give girls the freedom they need to make life-choices, to take charge of their lives and to shape their future as per their desires. Thus, a need of holistic approach beginning with providing safe and encouraging environments to girls at homes, schools and society is required to improve their life-management skills and to actually empower them for the new journey of life after schools.

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