

# Holistic education for girls: Dignity, ability and opportunity

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The National Education Policy (NEP) was launched in July 2020. (REPRESENTATIVE PHOTO)

Swami Vivekananda once said, “We want the education by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded, and by which one can stand on one’s own feet”. In India, girls are yet to find their footing. Educating them is not enough; education needs to enable them to break barriers, challenge societal mores, make informed decisions about their lives and become catalysts for change.

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Empowering girls through education is a strategic investment in the future of a nation, with girls actively contributing to the socio-economic development of their families and communities at large. This calls for a move beyond traditional schooling paradigms, to address pressing issues integral to girl empowerment and national advancement.

Numerous programmes promoting girls’ education and empowerment are underway. The government has introduced scholarships, infrastructure development and policy frameworks, while civil society works on a gamut of initiatives--from increased school enrolment and learning gains, to educational frameworks and refined governmental scholarship systems, to life skills, human rights awareness, digital inclusion, employability building, nutrition and sexual and reproductive health.

However, gender-based discrimination and violence, early marriage, and economic constraints prevent these initiatives from achieving desired objectives. While emphasis is placed on equal dignity and academic achievements of the girl child through school systemic reforms and mass sensitisation, there seems to be little attention on building lifelong skills that will shape her future.

By targeting end-to-end solutions, creating forward and backward linkages to 21st century workplace readiness, career planning, technical skills training, digital inclusion, financial inclusion, and access to credit and health services, we can foster self-confidence, critical thinking, and decision-making skills among girls. This can be bolstered through intrinsic human capabilities in peace building, compassion and ethics rather than compensating them with a vanilla overview of life skills and aspirations.

Girls are nested in environments which can have far reaching impact. Kanika, a quiet 7th-grade student at GSSS Farat learnt to express herself beyond the classroom under 'Khushiyon Ka Gullak', a social emotional learning initiative. By identifying and managing her emotions, she found expression that improved her overall well-being.

Girls’ education programmes need to engage at the personal level, with families and friends at the interpersonal level, and communities, frontline workers, civil society organisations at the broader level. This can trigger demand for information and services, improve negotiation and decision-making, promote gender equitable positive roles and expand gender responsive policies and systems.

Comprehensive and age-appropriate education on reproductive health, hygiene, and nutrition in school education can equip girls to take charge of their health. This education can be integrated into school curriculums and supplemented by community outreach programmes.

School management committees empowered under ‘Gender-inclusion Fund’ as per the National Education Policy 2020 can audit school premises to rule out school-related gender-based violence hotspots and discriminatory access to transport, hygiene and sanitation. Engaging adolescent girl and boy students in these audits can heighten awareness of problems, foster responsibility and instill problem-solving skills.

Grassroots experiences often encounter resistance to gender rights-based school education initiatives aimed at dismantling gendered norms and power dynamics. Therefore, it is essential for programmes to adopt more school-friendly, subtle, and creative approaches.

Often approaches to patriarchy, gender-based discrimination and violence in school environments fail because it is assumed that stakeholders need to be made aware of unfulfilled rights before they can embrace change. A reverse discovery change model on the other hand recognises the latent desire for change and can facilitate it using interactive techniques like Socratic dialogue.

Promoting aesthetic literacy, physical literacy, and project-based learning necessitate democratic participation transcending gender, caste, faith, social status, ability, language, appearance and geography and can go a long way in embedding deep rooted change.

The recent 'ASER – Beyond Basics' findings unearthed opportunities in adolescent education by leveraging their affinity for peer support and digital experiences. In Odisha, a group of adolescent girls casually visited the short-term electrical course at their village community learning centre to have fun as good friends but emerged as shining role models who are now earning electricians. This highlights the power of collective to counter gender barriers in STEM education and create work opportunities.

Leveraging technology to expand access to education, especially in remote and underserved geographies, can bridge gaps and provide girls access to holistic educational resources.

Girls' education programmes should, therefore, embrace a panoramic approach that transcends academics, that involves the girl's entire eco system with the school at the centre, and one that adopts disruptive methods to break down age old barriers. This multi-faceted approach will wield a profound influence on society while shaping a girl's potential, driving change from individual to societal level.

When girls thrive, intergenerational cycles of social challenges end. When girls learn and aspire, they become able to contribute to the economy of the nation. It is not merely about providing access to classrooms; it is about fostering an environment of holistic education that nurtures curiosity, builds skills, and empowers girls to become leaders and change-makers.

*This article is authored by Swati Piramal, vice chairperson, Piramal Group and Monal Jayaram, director, Piramal Foundation.*

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