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GIRLS' EMPOWERMENT WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE INDIAN CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS: A SNAPSHOT FROM THE GOVERNMENT-SPONSORED SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Indian women enjoyed equal status with men in all aspects in ancient ages where Rig Vedic ideologies were the fundamental base for the society. In the pre-Independence era the status of women in the society were fluctuating with the regnant and regime. Sometimes women became a constituent part of decision making and sometimes they were clutched under patriarchal subjugation and suppression. But after the Independence the Constitution of India indentures that there shall be no gender-discrimination in the country. The democratic nature of India is exercised via the gender equality practices but its consequence should reach all sectors in the entire nation. Keeping this prudence in mind, this study attempted to explore the awareness of girls of government sponsored secondary and higher secondary schools in Purulia, a socio-economically backward district in West Bengal regarding the Constitutional rights and legal provisions. Probability cluster sampling technique was employed to select 345 Secondary girls from class IX & Class X and 430 higher secondary girls from class XI & class XII and total 775 girls were interviewed face-to-face through semi-structured interview schedule. Analysis of their response showed that 91.6% (n=316) of secondary girls didn't know about the Constitutional provisions and women empowerment was totally new term for them. However, 70.47% (n=303) of higher secondary girls were acquainted with the Constitutional provisions but concept of women empowerment was unfamiliar to 95.82% (n=412) girls. Girls admitted that subject combinations in the curriculum and inherent messages from the co-curricular as well as Kanyashree club activities helped them to gather information about the empowerment through legal provisions. It was revealed from their responses that girls' access to physical resources as well as their participation in school activities and community programs was free from gender bias..

Keywords: Constitution, empowerment, kanyashree, schools, women

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INTRODUCTION

Women are denied. They are neglected. Even in the developed countries.

-Malala Yousafzai (2014 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate)

If anyone compares the above statement with the noble statement preached by the former prime minister of India Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru that “you can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women”. The status of the women in the society is declining even in this modern era of globalization (Panitapu, 2015; Gattaiah, 2017). India is the largest democratic country of the world in spite of that the Indian women have to confront myriads of challenges in the socio-cultural context from their childhood (Kumar, Mahathi & Thirthala, 2016). In the Vedic period Indian women enjoys equal status with men in all aspects of life but their status began to deteriorate approximately from the 500 BC and women were kept apart completely from the societal interference and their position was worsened with the incursion of the Mughal and European invaders (Yunus & Verma, 2015; Panitapu, 2015). A society can't run lively by males only; it must endorse their counterpart females to ensure the conducive environment in the society as women play a very significant and influential role in the progress of a family, society and country (Jadon & Shrivastava, 2018). Women must be empowered enough through the education to confront the challenges and issues arising out of social stratification, gender discrimination and other evil practices in order to change their life style (Bhat, 2015).

The Constitution of India and Indian Penal Code have granted equality to women and

empowered the state to take special measures in any type of discrimination caused through socio-economic, education, political issues etc. against women. The Fundamental rights also ensure the gender equality and prohibit any kind of discrimination against the women of the country (Kumar, Mahathi & Thirthala, 2016). A community will be developed through its human capital as their knowledge and skills will contribute to the national development (Efe, 2001). The girls must be educated in terms of their role in the society whether as producers or reproducers and they must be provided good and quality education for the development of the society (Ballara, 2002). Girls remain in touch with their mentor teachers/madams for a long time during the secondary school days and the lessons induced during this period of life make a strong foundation for their bright future. The secondary school education prepares them for the real world by inculcating the skills of effective communication, teamwork, critical thinking, leadership quality, time management etc. and they get a readiness for becoming a good citizen of the society. Girl-child education is a way to equip the girls with capability and mental powers which are helpful for them as well as for the family and society (Stronquist, 2000). The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Preamble of the Constitution of India, in fundamental rights, in fundamental duties and in directive principles (Tomar, 2014; Yunus & Verma, 2015; Kumar, Mahathi & Thirthala, 2016) but the fragrance of all these rights should reach to all girls in the entire nation to ensure women empowerment as gender inequality is prevailing with respect to accessibility to education (Bolaji, 2007)

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND ITS CONCERNMENT: REVIEW FROM THE RELATED

LITERATURE

Empowerment gives the opportunity to gain control over one's own life (Aspy & Sandhu, 1999) and it enhances the power of low-power group to reach to the power of high-power group (Bhadra, 2001). Women empowerment refers to an active and multi-dimensional process which helps the women to realize their full identity, potential and powers in all spheres of life so that they can take part in decision making activities in the society (Sahay, 1998). It is the propagation of liberty of choice, control and action in all spheres (Chattopadhyay, 2005). Also it is the recognition and enforcement of women's human rights to eliminate all kinds of discrimination against women (Manohar, 2001). Thus women empowerment is a process through which women become able to equip themselves with all sorts of power in accordance with their innate attributes and qualities to equalize their status with men. It aims to make women economically independent, self-reliant and to build high level of self-esteem to encounter at any hostile environment and all these can be attained through education (Devendra, 2001).

Women empowerment in the present situation is not only an imperative but also very crucial for any society (Mandal, 2013). It promotes self-respect and self-dignity and welfare of the society (Bhasin, 1998); holds a foundation to gender equal society (Rajput, 2001); control over material, human and intellectual resources (Kapur, 2001); powerful tools against poverty (Biswas, 2010); greater control and authority to improve the conditions of living (Jana, 2004); complete equality in all aspects of the social orders through gender equity (Aspy & Sandhu, 1999).

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Various dimensions of Indian Constitution and other legal provisions towards women empowerment have created the environment for achieving the equality and justice but it is more important than how many women or girls are aware of these provisions or rights. The arsenal will come into play only when all the female members of our society understand its meaning and its proper implementation is attained. The girls in the secondary schools remain in touch with their mentor teachers for a long time almost every day and in the near future they will be steering our nation. The adolescent girls must know her fundamental rights, duties, responsibilities and other safeguards in order to form a conducive society free from gender bias. Purulia is one of the most backward districts in West Bengal with a very low literacy rate (Patra et al., 2021) so the status of the girls' empowerment with reference to the Constitutional provisions must be assessed so that if any gap is found it may be addressed with requisite plan of actions.

Objectives

1. To explore the secondary girls' awareness level about the Constitutional rights and legal provisions.
2. To explore the higher secondary girls' awareness level about the Constitutional rights and legal provisions.
3. To explore the participation levels of girls in school activities and in community programs.

METHODOLOGY

Population

All the secondary (Class IX & Class X in the academic session 2022) and higher secondary (Class XI & Class XII in the academic session 2022-23) girls of Govt. sponsored Bengali medium schools in Purulia district, West Bengal constitute the population.

Sample

Using probability cluster sampling technique three schools were selected and all girls from class IX to class XII from those schools were included as the sample for the study. The details distribution is shown in Table 1&2.

Table 1: Sample Profile

School	Secondary Girls		Higher Secondary Girls		Total
	Class IX	Class X	Class XI	Class XII	
School A	59	54	84	76	273
School B	71	63	74	68	276
School C	52	46	71	57	226
Total	182	163	229	201	775

Table 2: Caste-category-wise sample profile

Class	Unreserved (UR)	Scheduled Caste (SC)	Scheduled Tribe (ST)	Other Backward Class(OBC)	Minority (Min)	Total
IX	14	74	63	28	03	182
X	09	66	47	39	02	163
XI	31	92	74	27	05	229
XII	26	83	65	23	04	201
Total	80	315	249	117	14	775

Tools and administration process

The investigators developed semi-structured interview schedule (description given in Table 3) and reached the selected schools and after taking permission from the Head of the Institution, class-wise group interviews were arranged with the girls. At first rapport was established with the girls and purpose of the study was explained then interviewed face-to-

face in groups and their responses were noted down. Interview sessions were continued from 1st July 2022 to 31st July 2022. After the group interview, the class teachers of respective classes were requested to give a brief description about the class which helped a lot during the analysis of data.

Table 3: Dimension-wise interview schedule

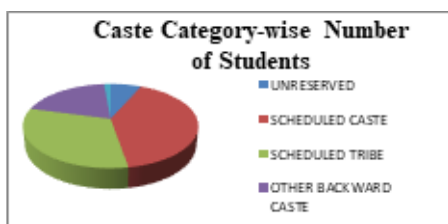
Sl. No.	Question sub-category	Type	Number of questions
1.	Demographic information	Qualitative	6
2.	Constitutional provisions	Qualitative	6
3.	Women empowerment	Qualitative	6
4.	Participation in school activities	Qualitative	6
5.	Participation in community	Qualitative	6

RESPONSE ANALYSIS

Qualitative responses from the girls were recorded and dimension wise analysis is given below.

RESPONSES OBTAINED FROM THE SECONDARY GIRLS

Demographic Information



It showed from the above pie charts that 93.34% (n=322) of the girls [SC-40.58% (n=140), ST-31.89% (n=110), OBC-19.42% (n=67) & Min-1.45% (n=05)] belonged to the reserved cast category. All the girls (n=345) belonged to rural area. Sources of their family income are farming, grocery, pottery, mason, carpentry, labour work etc. which shows that their families do not have any fixed annual income and belong to the lower class or lower-middle class in socio-economic aspect. Out of the reserved categories 90.68% (n=292) girls were first generation learners.

Constitutional provisions

Responses from the secondary girls showed that 91.6% (n=316) of them do not have heard the term Constitution. And the remaining 8.4% (n=29) girls have heard the term but do not know about its features. Some of the girls have admitted that they came to know the word 'Constitution' in some cultural functions held in their schools and it is related to British rule in India. They do not know about the legal provisions or any safeguards.

Women empowerment

The term 'women empowerment' is totally new to all the secondary girls (n=345). They have just listened to the interview questions but could not answer any question as the concept was unknown to them.

Participation in school activities

Secondary girls have agreed that they can take part equally in all activities like cultural events, games and sports, special day observation etc. organized in school premises. Teachers and non-teaching staff treat them equally with the boys and no gender discrimination is visible in this aspect. Moreover some girls belonging to the tribal community are more successful than the boys in some athletic events as these girls

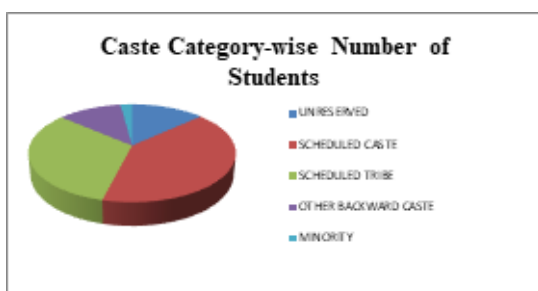
occupy top ranks in athletic competitions every year. Girls' enrollment is also higher than the boys in class IX and X and girls secure top positions in academic achievements. It has also been reported by the respective class teachers that daily attendance of girls in the school is significantly higher than the boys.

Participation in community

It has been found from the analysis of interview data that girls do not get all the opportunities which are available for the boys in their community. According to the girls' responses gender barrier is prevailing in the community. In almost all out-door activities male members are preferred than the females. Girls are mostly engaged in house-hold activities and they do not possess adequate enthusiastic motivation for proactive participation in any community program. Girls encounter various limitations in their participation due to some existing social norms.

RESPONSE OBTAINED FROM THE HIGHER SECONDARY GIRLS

Demographic information



Among the higher secondary girls 84.42% (n=363) belonged to rural area and 15.58% (n=67) were from urban area. Data showed that 86.74% (n=373) of girls belonged to the reserved categories [SC-40.70% (n=175), ST-

32.32% (n=139), OBC-11.63% (n=50) & Min-2.1% (n=09)] and 13.26% (n=57) of girls belonged to the unreserved category and all these information have been portrayed in above pie charts. 6.28% (n=27) of girls have family income from government service and 93.72% (n=403) girls have sources of family income from farming, grocery, pottery, mason, carpentry, labour work etc.

Constitutional provisions

Responses from the higher secondary girls showed that 29.53% (n=127) of them do not have heard the term Constitution. Other girls 70.47% (n=303) are aware about the Constitution and some of the Constitutional rights and provisions. They have admitted that their elective subjects History, Political Science and Education are the prime sources of all the information they have regarding the Constitution. The girls revealed that they have just read the facts regarding Constitutional provisions but they did not implement any of these in their life experience.

Women empowerment

When the girls heard the term 'women empowerment' only 4.18% (n=18) girls could understand the term and 95.82% (n=412) were asking for the explanation of the term. When the dimensions were explained then understood the theme only but could not give example from daily life.

Participation in school activities

Higher secondary girls are more active in participating in different school activities. Especially the members of the Kanyashree clubs were very enthusiastic in nature and they happily told that all the cultural programs in

school premises like Independence Day, Netaji's birthday, Swami Vivekananda's birthday, Republic day, Rabindranath Tagore's birth day, Swarasati Puja etc. are organized by the girls and they permit only some active boys to participate as organizing members. In respect of school activities girls are dominating members of the school. Attendance of girls in the schools is higher than the boys. Girls and boys have equal access to all physical and academic facilities available in school.

Participation in community

Girls are eager to participate in all activities in their community and boys and girls have equal access to participate. All the tribal girls (32.32%; n=139) are more active than their counterpart tribal boys as they have reported that they do all the activities outside the home required for their daily life. Higher secondary girls have reported that there is no gender bias in community activities.

DISCUSSIONS

It is distinctly observed from the demographic information of girls that the sample belongs mostly to the reserved category having poor family income and they most of them are from rural area. Girls do not have opportunities to access urban facilities. Also girls did not get any parental care to their academic career as most of them were first generation learners. Most of the secondary girls were unable to understand the Constitutional rights and legal provisions. So the girls are not aware about the constitutional safeguards. But large percentage of higher secondary girls was able to understand the terms as they have learnt these from their taught subjects in curriculum. So, the explanation and analysis of the terms during teaching-learning

sessions regarding the Constitutional aspects help the higher secondary girls to recognize the Constitutional aspects. Thus more these legal aspects appear in the curricular activities more will be the influence to recognize and implement. So, Constitutional rights, legal provisions and other safeguards for women must be added to the secondary and higher secondary school curriculum so that these vital thoughts may be seeded within the girls along with their academic activities. Similarly 'women empowerment' term also sound new to the girls as the concept of the empowerment has not been explored through any activities so much before the girls. Constitutional rights and legal provisions are imperative arsenal to the empowerment of girls but the snapshots coming out of the assessment through the semi-structured interview of girls of government sponsored schools in West Bengal are nebulous as the girls are not prepared enough to implement the Constitutional rights to the roadmap towards girls' empowerment. So, the status of the 'women empowerment' has not attained a benchmark in the government sponsored school scenario. To attain the lofty goal the girls belonging to the government sponsored secondary and higher secondary schools must be seeded and sensitized with requisite knowledge and information regarding Indian Constitutional rights, legal provisions and safeguards for women empowerment. Girls' participation in school activities confirmed that school environment is free from any type of gender discrimination and girls have equal access to all activities. But girls' participation in community programs is restricted to some extent due to the feasibility of the situation. Yet these community programs are satisfactory enough to the fact that the participating group of girls can

augment the way of women empowerment through their togetherness, unity and Constitutional awareness. It has also been addressed that the Kanyashree clubs in government sponsored schools are functioning in proper way by boosting up self-confidence, self-efficacy and participation of girls in school and community related activities. It helps the adolescent girls to promote positive values through psycho-social supports in order to counter the gender-based discriminatory practices.

WAYS AND MEANS TO FOSTER WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH GIRLS' AWARENESS

In view of the above study it has been established that awareness levels regarding Constitutional rights and legal provisions of girls reading in Secondary and Higher Secondary Government sponsored schools in Purulia district must be enhanced. Following ways and means may be adopted in educational milieu to meet the bench mark of awareness.

- 1. Introduction of Girls' Empowerment Theme into the Curriculum:** The theme of the girls' empowerment may be brought into the curriculum in diversified manner. It may be exercised through a general concept, language in mathematical and numerical problems, historical movement, political backgrounds etc. so that girls can visualize their innate potential and come forward.
- 2. Arrangement of Competition:** various quiz competition, sit and draw competition, poster mapping, and wall slogans may be arranged in inter-district levels to equip the girls with necessary information and activities. Youth Parliament or Mock Parlia-

ment competition at different levels may induce democratic, secular and republic of India concept among the girls. Concepts of Political Science and Civics may help girls to acquire knowledge of Indian Constitution and Polity.

- 3. Leadership Quality Training:** Different stakeholders from State Level, District level, Block level and Panchayat level may arrange leadership quality training programs for the adolescent girls. Awareness programs regarding the Constitutional rights and legal provisions may inculcate the concepts of women security, safeguards and empowerment.
- 4. Tagging with Local Administration:** Local administration may arrange an induction programs with the secondary and higher secondary girls of local Government sponsored schools and they may exhibit their law and order functions in administration. Girls will observe the activities and will acquire a comprehensive knowledge about the administration.
- 5. Kanyashree Club Activities:** Kanyashree Clubs have tremendous influence on adolescent girls of Government sponsored schools in West Bengal. Club activities include various programs to prevent child marriage and to foster women empowerment. If these activities are performed in regular pattern then club member girls will be aware about their potential. Community approach activities with their groups are very popular to create we-feeling among the girls. The activities include child marriage prevention and school drop-out prevention, exposure visits to public institutions (Bank, Post office, Police Station,

Block Development Office), Nutrition, Health and Hygiene, Adolescent Sexual Reproductive Health, Sports and Physical activities, Career and Skill Development, Environmental awareness and conservation activities etc. which provide adolescent girls with a peer group to interact with the community that promotes positive values, self-efficacy and provide accurate information and psycho-social support. Adolescent girls can spread the message of women empowerment among themselves and in the society.

6. **Discussion Session with Guardians of Girls:** The study revealed that most of the secondary girls are the first generation learners and they lack in parental academic support. Discussion session with guardians of the adolescent girls under the supervision of District authority and local administration will play a significant role to promote awareness among the guardians which in turn will create conducive environment in the society.
7. **Cyber Security Training:** The adolescent girls must be provided cyber-security training from the stakeholders as online platform is very common to the girls in new normal environment. The impact of COVID-19 pandemic and National Education Policy 2020 has spread the message of blended learning in academic landscape. Girls must

know the safety and security regarding the use of internet and various websites. The beckon from the negative world may induce cyber-bullying, cyber-crime on the adolescent girls so parents as well as the teachers must come forward to tackle the situation so that user girls of virtual platforms become aware of the entire situation and they can move with all types of safety and security.

CONCLUSION

The theme and credence of women empowerment is enshrined in the Preamble, Constitutional rights and in other legal provisions existing in India. But the exercise of these armors has not been performed at all levels. In view of the response analysis it appears lucidly that girls in the government sponsored secondary and higher secondary schools in West Bengal are also lying under the obscurity of Constitutional awareness. The apathetic torpor regarding the Constitutional rights and legal provisions is impeding the ways of women empowerment. The policy makers, educationists, teaching professionals and other stakeholders must interpolate the light of Constitutional provisions into the school curriculum by tagging the Kanyashree clubs so that the notion of girls' empowerment is exercised and established through various social and educational activities.

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