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Split Wide Open

Why the arrest of a student leader has created a vertical divide in the nation’s politics and media

Ajith Pillai

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Way to Go, GIRL!

A unique program in Bihar called Girls First is inspiring confidence and spreading knowledge about the ills of child marriage, early pregnancies and gender discrimination.

By Murali Krishnan in Patna

On a cold wintry morning in January, school kids, mainly girls from 12 to 14 years, have lined up for assembly in a government-run school in Maner, some 35 kms from Patna. The school is a decrepit building but attendance is high despite the biting cold. After class, they are part of peer support groups led by female teachers or women from their community, which are held twice a week, sometimes more.

This unique program is called Girls First and is conducted by CarStone, an NGO, which has been running it in six Bihar districts for over two years. Here, women talk about the problems besetting girls in this state—child marriage, lack of education, inequality of the sexes.... Now even young boys are told about these so as to change their outlook. A typical lesson combines 20-30 minutes of skill-building, followed by group discussions and problem-solving.

CHANGED AMBITIONS

VON visited one of these sessions, where the girls are giggly, jostling with excitement. Tanya Kausaf, 13, is happy she went through this program which she finished last year. “I have learnt to speak up and to speak my mind. I couldn’t do this earlier, I was scared. Earlier, I did not like studying. Now my ambitions have changed. I have a goal in life,” she asserted.

Child marriages, early pregnancies and their complications and premature babies are not uncommon among girls here. Most of them are married off early and seldom get an education. Like Tanaya, Komal, Komari, a Class X student, too believes she has benefitted from the program.

"Earlier, my mother would scold me and I would keep quiet. But now things have changed. She does not shout anymore. Ever since I got into this program, I have changed. Now, I am sure that I want to be a teacher."

Her mother, Poonam Devi, is proud of her daughter’s transformation. “I feel so happy that Komal has become a tough person. I still clothes and do odd jobs to make a living. But seeing my daughter blossom, I now hope she gets a good job.”

"I have learnt to speak up and to speak my mind. I couldn’t do this earlier, I was scared. Earlier, I did not like studying. Now I have a goal in life."

— Tanya Kausaf (left), 13, finished the Girls First program last year

PLIGHT OF GIRL CHILD

This program is part of an attempt to change the life of the girl child in rural India, where she is often subjected to gender-based discrimination. Girls are often denied education and forced into early marriages and child-bearing even before they outgrow their teen years. Inverting in their education can be one of the most potent weapons to fight for greater social justice.

Currently, there are 70 million child brides in the world, according to the US-based International Center for Research on Women. And in Bihar, child marriages constitute 60 percent of all marriages. This is the highest in India.

Manoj Verma, director of the Patna-based Integrated Development Foundation, which is also a partner in the program, said: “It is important to empower girls by giving them knowledge about sexual and reproductive health and provide them education and livelihood opportunities. It is important to build family and community support and promote an equitable relationship between men and women.”

He added that by attending the sessions, the girls have started questioning and participating in the teaching process: “This is a positive sign—all the girls start asking questions from the teachers...articulating and fighting against child marriage."

The organizers are concentrating on...
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adolescent girls for now. Komkum Kumari, an instructor, has been teaching girls for over a year and says she sees a distinct change in them as they have become more confident. “What this program has taught girls is that they are no less capable… that they are as strong as boys. It has taught them to surge ahead and think of goals. The lessons they learn here have influenced their parents, many of whom are illiterate.”

The girls’ growing confidence, laughter and joy in learning makes Geetika Agrawal, director of the India chapter of Corinthea, proud. “Bihar is one of the states where you find early marriages, which is a big problem. In most families here, girls are discriminated against. But at the same time, the state government is giving them a lot of opportunities. There is transition happening in Bihar.”

**POSITIVE RESULTS**
A randomized controlled trial (RCT) of Girls First was done in 2013-14 involving 5,300 girls and 74 community women facilitators in 76 schools in rural Bihar. The results showed that the program had a significant impact on mental and physical health, school performance, engagement, self-advocacy, social skills and relationships. The RCT was conducted in partnership with the Bihar Education Project Council and David & Lucile Packard Foundation.

In another school in Beta, about 40 kms from Patna, a round-table session is in progress where 20 girls talk about conquering their fears when accosted by hooligans or facing a drunken father. Many adolescent girls have stories about eve-teasing or safety concerns. Medhlika Mani, an instructor, is positive. “Their listening power has increased and they now talk assertively. And they resolve their problems in their peer support groups. There is a friendly environment and they are creating the same for others too. And they are able to talk to boys.”

On a more positive note, they also have the power to change their parents’ behavior as well. Upon completing the program, many parents said that their children gave them a more positive outlook about the future.

For Steve Levental, the executive director of the program, this is a shot in the arm. The children are proving to be agents of change, he said. “The most important thing in this work is to start with where you are, not where you wish you were. In some cases, the baseline may be low considering what your hopes or aspirations are. But what is exciting is that we see the impact on the girls really quickly. The takeaway is that it is not difficult to change,” he maintained.

Bihar could well show the way for other states in the way it treats the girl child.