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The World According to Adolescents

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Conversation with adolescents girls in different parts of the southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Tamil Nadu reveal unforeseen similarities, as well as expected differences, in their experiences, and perceptions of girlhood and the adolescence.

The term adolescence comes from the Latin word “adolescere,” which literally means “grow to maturity.” This implies that the period of adolescence is one during which the child is slowly transformed into a mature adult. It is clear that this process involves biological, intellectual and psychological change. Yet, the growth into maturity of adolescent girls in India is acknowledged almost exclusively in terms of physiology, with the onset of puberty signalling the moment at which a girl, now capable of reproduction, ceases to be a child and becomes a woman.

Of course, for the majority of Indian girls childhood is nothing like the carefree, idyllic ideal of the middle and upper class imagination, with many having to pitch in with sibling care, other household duties and, often, even wage work from a very early age. According to a study of “growing up in rural India: Problems and Needs of Adolescents Girls”, conducted by the Centre for Social Research in 12 villages of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Delhi, most girls seem to jump straight from childhood into adulthood. Many assume adult roles in the family even before the onset of puberty, taking responsibility for household and childcare tasks and, in addition, working in the fields.

These girls, too, experience the joys and pains of growing up. These may vary depending on geographic location, economic circumstances and, most significantly, the social and cultural environment in which they find themselves. Conversations with groups of adolescent girls in different parts of the southern Indian states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh reveal unforeseen similarities, as well as expected differences, in their experiences and perceptions of girlhood and adolescence.

The girls with whom the conversations took place ranged from affluent girls in relatively cosmopolitan Kochi, girls from middle and lower middle class families in Thiruvella and Alappuzha (some from dalit communities) and girls from low-

income fishing and tribal communities in Thiruvananthapuram and Kochi respectively (all in Kerala) to girls belonging to predominantly low-income and scheduled caste or tribe families from villages in Salem and Dharmapuri districts (Tamil Nadu) and Mahbubnagar, Medak and Rangareddy districts (Andhra Pradesh), as well as lower middle class girls in the old city of Hyderabad.

The conversations revolved mainly around their experience of and feelings about growing up female in their specific social milieus in the hope that this would afford glimpses into their self-image and grant some insights into their self-esteem and self-confidence levels. The idea was to explore the factors that could influence the development of self-image, self-esteem and self-confidence in young girls.

The most startling and saddening revelation to emerge from the conversations is that all the girls, virtually without exception, had often wished they had not been born female. Most of them could not think of any advantage attached to being female - except, significantly (with respect to their sense of self), that as girls they were able to help, love and look after their parents. On the other hand, they could easily point out several disadvantages associated with their gender.

At their age, understandably, the most aggravating aspect of being female seems to be the curtailment of their freedom and mobility, especially from the pre-adolescent stage onwards. This was a universal complaint voiced by all the girls, irrespective of location and socioeconomic or cultural background. Interestingly, many girls used the evocative words "swathanthriam" and "aazaadi" (both meaning freedom) to describe what they lacked. The denial or absence of freedom was the main and most galling difference they perceived between boys and girls.

"Boys have more 'adhikaram' (authority) and more 'avakasham' (rights)," said Sandhya, a vocal teenager from an economically weak but urbanised tribal community in Kochi. According to her, boys are not only more mobile than girls of their own age but actually more free to come and go than adult women, who generally need permission from male family members - sometimes even their own sons - to move about.

Girls from this community, like most of their counterparts in the state irrespective of socioeconomic status, are allowed to go to school and tutorials, usually travelling in groups, but have to come straight home after classes. There is no question of going anywhere else except with adult family members.

According to Cuckoo, Anna and Priyanka, high school students in elite English-medium institutions, who live in a genteel residential area in Kochi, the bane of

their lives is gossip, the threat of which makes their otherwise sensible and reasonable parents keep an uncomfortably tight rein on them. They chafe at restrictions on their mobility as well as the strict dress code to which they are expected to conform.

For girls in Salem district, the mobility problem is even more acute and affects their access to education. While most of them get to attend primary school, generally located fairly close to home, many are subsequently forced to drop out - even if they are doing well in their studies - because attending middle and high school usually involves travel to a bigger village or town.

"We girls are just imprisoned at home," said Mangammal, an extraordinarily bright and vivacious girl in V. Mettur, a small, remote village in Salem district. Many of the girls here and their counterparts in Reddiyur, a somewhat larger and better-endowed village in the same area, said decisions about their education as well as other aspects of their lives are often dictated by their elder brothers rather than their parents, possibly because of the family's dependence on financial contributions from the eldest son.

While primary school drop-outs in Kombur, a scheduled tribe village in Dharmapuri district, are engaged as child labour in the tile and brick factories as well as a mill that have recently come up in the neighbourhood, in many villages adolescent girls are simply kept house-bound, performing domestic chores in their natal home until they are relocated to undertake the same tasks in their marital home.

This sheer waste of their human potential at a time when these girls are full of youthful abilities, energy and enthusiasm is both deeply tragic at the personal level and a colossal folly at the societal and national levels.

The girls are aware that the restrictions placed on them are meant primarily to safeguard their all-important "reputation." As far as society is concerned, they say, the most valued attribute in a girl is what is known as "good character," best demonstrated by socially acceptable behaviour ("swabhaavam"). Anything that could give the impression that their character and behaviour are not quite up to the socially defined mark is, therefore forbidden.

According to them, girls -are expected to be quiet, sensible, hard-working, well-behaved, obedient and, above all, unassertive. As Anna put it, the same behaviour that in a boy would be seen as "smart" would be deemed "over-smart" in a girl.

Sandhya and her friends suggest that their mobility is inhibited by the fear inculcated in them from childhood - fear of gossip and fear of violence. Almost all the girls admitted that reports of atrocities against women make them nervous and diffident. They are well aware of crimes like rape, wife battering and dowry-related violence, to which many girls and women fall victim.

The recent, infamous Suryanalli case - in which an adolescent girl was tricked into accompanying a man who not only raped her but passed her on to others in different parts of the state (the most well-known example of an alarming, seemingly new phenomenon that has come to be locally known as "relay rape") - has made girls in Kerala, extremely conscious of their vulnerability.

But apart from the possibility of outright violence, there is the ever-present reality of sexual harassment on the streets (euphemistically known as eve-teasing), which also plays a major role in diminishing girls' mobility. Virtually every girl has experienced some form of sexual harassment in the public sphere. While some say the boys and men of their own community or neighbourhood do not harass them, others complain that even local boys, including those younger than them, indulge in eve-teasing.

Although they seem to regard sexual harassment as an inescapable irritant, their responses to it vary. Some, like Sandhya in Kochi, say they talk back to their tormentors in an effort to shame or shock them into silence. Others say they prefer to ignore these roadside romeos because they believe the slightest attention, even when it is negative, only serves to encourage them. Also, they are afraid of further and more severe harassment if they publicly humiliate such aggressors through their retorts. And they are not confident of public support in such an eventuality.

But, either way, the phenomenon of sexual harassment is a constant source of tension on the streets and other public spaces. The daily dilemma of deciding how to deal with it is not only stressful but wasteful of valuable time and energy. In addition, the threat and fact of such harassment both restrict their freedom and contribute towards making them more timid than they would otherwise be.

These are just some of the many problems faced by adolescent girls as they grow into maturity. It is clear that, for these girls the curtailment of their freedom and mobility and the reasons underlying the restrictions placed on them are extremely important issues. Even if they get all the nutrition, healthcare and education they require and deserve, unless these seemingly less pressing problems are also tackled, adolescent girls will continue to be unfairly shackled and thereby prevented from realising their full human potential.

Unfortunately, while the physiological aspects of adolescence are beginning to generate concern, the psychological and social aspects of growing up in India today seem to receive little attention from any quarter. Few of the limited number of programmes for adolescent girls now being devised and implemented seem to adequately address the kind of issues the girls themselves highlight.

Since both governmental and non-governmental programmes for adolescent girls in India are still in their infancy, there is scope for incorporating the insights gained from these conversations - which could be corroborated and amplified through more systematic study - so that a wider range of the felt needs and problems of their "target group" are effectively addressed.

As some writers have pointed out in the book, "Adolescent Girl - An Indian Perspective," edited by Dr. Sunil Mehra, "The psychological and social impact of puberty on young people and those around them are dependent on the social and cultural milieu" and those working with adolescents need "to re-examine their interventions and contribute to integrate larger sociocultural aspects which shape lives of individuals."