

Do school girls' dreams come true?



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The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) - 2023 has pointed out that school-going girls' dreams of becoming doctors or engineers do not come true practically. In the past, education was beyond the reach of women and yet, with the growing influence of social reform movements, opportunities for women's education have, of late, increased fabulously. Till a few decades ago, girls were allowed to study only at the primary level. Today that trend has changed. However, all said and done, girl students are still denied opportunities to pursue their dreams in higher education and jobs vigorously and seamlessly.

Drop-out syndrome

An ASER report came out in January, 2024, which is based on a model survey done with the girl students in schools in the age group of 14-18 from 28 districts spread across 26 states in the country. According to the report, 86.8 per cent of the students in the 14-18 age group pursue school education; only 3.9 per cent at age 14 drop out of schools. The school drop-out rate at age 18 has risen to 32.6 per cent. That is to say, both boys and girls at least have school education up to class 12.

The girls' school drop-out rate, which was at a high in the past, has, over the years, been coming down. In 2017, 14.4 per cent of boys and girls in the 14-18 age group did not join schools and instead, got involved in family business, income-generating jobs and domestic work. But this rate has come down and only 13.2 per cent are now away from schools. In 2017, 16 per cent of young girls in the age group of 14-18 dropped out of schools. The figure among the boys was 11.9 per cent. That is, there was a 4.1 per cent gap between boys and girls who were school drop-outs. But in 2023, this gap got reduced to just 0.2 per cent. That is, the gender difference in school drop-out rates has been decreasing, conveying the message that women are as seriously pursuing education as men do.

Asked what they would do after school education, 21 per cent of students (men 19.9 per cent and women 22 per cent) said they had not yet thought about it. It means that one-fifth of students are not aware of what they will do after schooling.

As for jobs after education, men's primary choices are defence (13.8 per cent) and police (13.6 per cent) while women like to choose teaching job (16 per cent) and medicine (14.8 per cent) and surprisingly tick the police department as their third choice (12.5 per cent). They choose all these jobs because society attaches no importance to jobs demanding physical work. They are inspired by an ambition to upgrade themselves in the society through education, says the survey report.

Ambition and ground reality

The dream of becoming an engineer or a doctor inspires 18.2 per cent of girls and 16.7 per cent of boys. Yet what groups do they opt for in their Plus-2 education? About 36.3 per cent of boys and 28 per cent of girls go for STEM, that is, science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine.

Generally, admissions in STEM are higher at about 60 per cent in South India. But the figure is just below 30 per cent in states such as Uttar Pradesh where most students join arts, science and social science courses.

“The enthusiasm that girl students show about their future plans mostly reflects what they are willing to do in an ideal world,” says researcher Suman Bhattacharjea. The burden of domestic chores, family constraints and social definitions of what a woman should be have impacted the women's freedom and higher education ambitions and pursuits, she says. That is to say, an ideal social-familial environment has not yet been formed so as to enable girl students' dream to come true. It is also to be noted that in the present times marked by commercialisation of higher education, several parents are confronted with economic constraints paying as they do through the nose for providing their girl children with higher education.

Girl students are bound by the social and familial limitations though they aspire to take off, spreading their wings unfettered. But their wings get weakened by the denial of opportunities for them to learn life skills. Hence, the poetic maxim, “women are no inferior to men,” remains an impossible dream in most girl students' lives.

For instance, a girl is not permitted to go anywhere in her home town as a boy is. The survey report says that though all people are able to use smart phones, only 34 per cent of girl students in the 17-18 age group have the skill of using the Google Map while 77.1 per cent of

their male counterparts have acquired that skill. That is to say, the ability of standing on one's own feet making the most of technology is comparatively less among girl students.

Let women's wings turn strong

A post-education career is determined by several factors such as social status, economic condition and job market environment. However, schools can play an immensely vital role in the efforts to translate the children's dreams into reality. Though a slightly different situation prevails in southern states, for most girl students it is only the woman teachers in their schools who can be role models. It is rare that a lady doctor meets a woman official.

No inputs are given for the students' future planning in most schools. Not even simple initiatives are taken to expose the students to opportunities in the job market and arrange an interaction with successful industrialists and entrepreneurs. Particularly, it is imperative to create opportunities for girl students to hone their life skills so that their wings of aspirations get strengthened. It is a matter that deserves and demands a keen attention from schools, educationists and social activists alike.

Translated by V. Mariappan.