

## **What Are Their Dreams? Exploring Educational Aspirations Of Young Girls In Rural Haryana**

**ANSHUL SINGHAL\*, SARITA ANAND AND DIVYA MEHTA**

<sup>1</sup>Senior Research Scholar, <sup>2</sup>Associate Professor and <sup>3</sup>Research Scholar  
Department of Development Communication and Extension,  
Lady Irwin College University of Delhi, Delhi (India)

### **ABSTRACT**

It has been widely accepted that development needs to be evaluated not just in terms of economic growth but also in terms of the advancement of human capabilities. The social fibre of India is predominantly patriarchal and contributes extensively to secondary status of women and girls reflected through skewed sex ratio over the years. The problem is particularly severe at younger ages; declining child sex ratio (CSR) from 964 in 1971 to 962 in 1981, 953 in 1991, 927 in 2001, and 914 in 2011 reveals a peculiar paradox of Indian society. Haryana is at the lowest rung of the ladder amongst all states of India with 830 girls for 1000 boys in 0-6 years age group. In such a patriarchal setup, Bibipur village in Jind district of Haryana hosted a first-all meeting of *Gram Sabha* on the issue of sex-selective abortion wherein *Khap Panchayats* came together for the first time to raise the issue. Besides this, the sex ratio in the village has seen an upward trend and there were 51 girls and 45 boys born as per 2013 estimates. Hence it was important to understand the present scenario in light of momentum generated around the importance of girl children and their development. The qualitative study determines the educational and career aspirations of girls and their parent(s). Since aspirations are shaped by familial and social factors, the study attempted to identify these vital factors. The data was collected using semi-structured interview schedules. The findings revealed that socialization vis à vis gender roles internalized by girls kept them subjugated. The community norm of considering the girl as a temporary member in the natal home and an outsider in husband's home, bestowed a secondary status to them. The general community mindset regarding girls' education and their aspirations was predominantly conservative. But it may change gradually in light of the recent initiatives being taken both at the local and national level, such as '*beti bachao, beti padhao*', to support education for girls. It was found that most of girls were studying till class XII but continuing education beyond it was still a concern due to various socio economic and cultural factors, documented by the research.

**Key Words :** Sex ratio, Gender discrimination, Aspirations, Education, Girl child

### **INTRODUCTION**

Development can be viewed as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people

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enjoy. Analyzing development in terms of expanding substantial freedoms directs attention towards the ends that make development imperative, rather than merely to some of the means that, *inter alia*, play a major part in the process. Development requires the elimination of major sources of confinement (Sen, 1999). There is widespread acceptance today that development needs to be evaluated not just in terms of economic growth but also in terms of the advancement of human capabilities, and that enhancing human well-being is not just a means but also an end in itself (Panda and Agarwal, 2005). If development means the expansion of human capabilities, then participation of women in the workforce and equality among both the sexes in all aspects of life should form an integral part of any exercise for evaluating developmental progress.

Women constitute almost half of the entire population of India but they form the largest restrained group in relatively all aspects. As the social fibre of India is predominantly patriarchal and contributes extensively to the secondary status of women, they have been denied their basic rights and freedoms leading to poor socio-economic and political status of women. This has further resulted in substandard representation of India in terms of Human Development Index. Gender-related Development Index clearly reflects inequality in survival, education and economic contribution of women and men. All the three factors are interlinked but are culturally rooted in patriarchy. India has been traditionally and culturally plagued with the problem of gender discrimination of the worst form: the avoidance of female births (Patel *et al.*, 2013).

Sex ratio is taken to be a powerful indicator of women's position in any society and is used to measure the extent of the prevailing equity between males and females in a society at a given point of time. A change in child sex ratio index reflects underlying attitude towards the girl child and the state of gender relations. The recently released data from the Indian Census ([censusindia.gov.in](http://censusindia.gov.in)) has refocused the world's attention on the dark side of India's demographic change—a low and falling ratio of girls to boys. For the last 40 years, each successive census has found the number of young girls shrinking relative to boys. Interestingly, the decline in the child sex ratio has occurred in the phase of rising living standards and improvements in every other indicator of demographic change and human development, *i.e.* average life expectancy, infant mortality, male and female literacy, fertility rate, and enrolment of children in school (Nandi and Deolalikar, 2013).

Women also form a vital part of the Indian workforce. The work participation rate for women was 25.5% in 2011, which continues to be significantly less in comparison to the work participation rate of men. In 2011, the work participation rate for women, working mainly as cultivators and agricultural labourers, in rural areas was 30.0%. Urban areas contributed to 15.4% wherein women were mostly engaged in the unorganized sectors such as household industries, petty trades and services, buildings and construction. As far as the organized sector is concerned, women workers constituted 20.4% and were employed in community, social and personnel services in March 2010 (Kumari and Pandey, 2012 and Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India, 2013). Although, Haryana's overall workforce participation rate is only marginally better than the all-India average of 39.8%, of which 27.1% is occupied by female workforce participation ([censusindia.gov.in](http://censusindia.gov.in)). Though it remains comparatively lower than that of males, but the trend is increasing gradually

with the increasing urbanization and literacy rate.

Education acts as one of the critical factors in influencing the aspirations of girls' and their capacity to work. It holds the key to economic growth, social transformation, modernization and national integration. Literacy rate in Haryana has seen an upward trend and is 75.55% (Census, 2011). Of that, male literacy stands at 84.06% while female literacy is at 56.91%.

To propose the problem, it may be recalled that though several Indian have achieved national and international honour in the fields of science, politics and leadership, business, sports etc; yet these progressive developments cannot hide one of the worst looming "gender" crisis faced by India with rapid diminution of women's population. During 1961 and 2011, India's population at the collective level has witnessed a decline in child sex ratio (CSR) by 69 points (from 976 to 914 females per 1000 males). Particularly in Haryana, the CSR has been on an unabated decline with certain ups and downs since its formation as a separate state in 1966. Between 1981 and 2001, CSR in the state has decreased from 902 to 819, a decline by 83 points. But during the decade of 1991-2001 alone, the decline in this ratio has been more precipitous, i.e. of 60 points. However, an increase of 11 points has been noticed in CSR during the decade 2001 to 2011. Despite this escalation, Haryana is at the lowest rung of ladder amongst all states of India with 830 girls for 1000 boys in 0-6 years age group. This indicates a marked preference for male children which may be due to the differentials in parents' aspirations for their sons and daughters (*censusindia.gov.in*).

Thus to improve the status of our country, it is important to bring women at par with men in almost all aspects of life; if the status of women in the country is rectified then consequentially it will ameliorate the status of our country as well. Therefore in order to understand and modify one's choices, it is vital to recognize what determines his or her aspirations (defined as a desire to achieve) (*www.merriam-webster.com*). Markus and Nurius (1986) have reported aspirations as one's ideas and hopes of "possible selves", i.e. what a person would like to and what would not like to become or achieve. In psychology, aspiration level has been defined as the level of quality of a task which one desires to attain. Aspirations are usually determined in early childhood and are liable to change throughout the life (Kumari and Pandey, 2012).

In Indian context, family life is the foundation and cornerstone of society and respect for parents is continually emphasized in the family patterns. Therefore from this kind of acculturation children incorporate the values of parents since childhood and behave in accordance with the family code and ethics. Sex of the child might be an important factor in shaping the perceptions of parents' for their children. Hence it may play a major role in moulding the perspectives of girl children in terms of their future aspirations. Beyond the macro factors like rural or urban vicinity, micro factors like parents' education, occupation, self drive and role models of an individual might be important factors in influencing the aspirations of any individual.

As a significant number of women are reaching great heights, the mindset of people towards their daughters are also expected to undergo transition. Thus, a study was carried out to gain insight into the aspirations of girls and their parents regarding education and future employment. Since the aspirations are shaped by familial and social factors, the study

also attempts to identify the vital factors fabricating such aspirations in order to understand the social status of girl child in the family.

## METHODOLOGY

The state of Haryana has the lowest sex ratio, 830 (censusindia.gov.in), in the country. The NFHS-3 data indicates existence of strong son preference in Haryana with 97.4% people having two sons in urban and 97.7% in rural areas (District Level Household Survey, India, Haryana, 2007-2008). However, amidst the odds, lies Bibipur village in Jind district of Haryana wherein the *Gram Panchayat* seems to be proactive in addressing the issue of survival and education of girl children. It hosted the first all-woman meeting of *Gram-Sabha* on the issue of sex-selective abortion wherein the *Khap Panchayats* came together for the first time to raise the issue. Besides, the village's sex ratio has also seen an upward trend wherein 51 girls and 45 boys were born as per 2013 estimates (Sosu, 2014). As a reflection of various initiatives taken at the local level by the Panchayat members and momentum generated around the status of girl child at the national level with the recent launch of '*Betibachaobeti Padhao* (BBBP) *Yojana* (save daughter, educate daughter), Bibipur village was selected as the locale of the qualitative study.

For the sample for the study, 30 girls studying in Class XII of a co-educational government higher secondary school lying close to Bibipur village and their parents were purposively selected to understand their aspirations towards education and future employment. After taking due permission from the school authority, girls were interviewed in-depth in the school premises while home visits were made for interviewing mothers and fathers separately.

Also, a pilot study was conducted to test the feasibility of the study and the developed tools. Further, ethical considerations of having participant's informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and the right to refuse or withdraw were assured while conducting the study. Data from interviews was descriptive in nature. All the transcripts were indexed with a priori and emerging codes. These coded segments were charted and summarized for each category. Further analysis to identify linkages, associations and limiting factors were developed and qualitative techniques were used for analysing the collected data.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Profile of the respondents :

**Girls:** The girls selected for the study belonged to the age group of 16-18 years and were studying in 12th grade of co-ed government higher secondary school.

**Mothers:** The mothers of the selected girls were also interviewed. Majority of them were in the middle age category of 30-35 years. As more than half of them were either illiterate or had studied up to 5th grade, it points towards the poor educational status of people in the village. 45% of the respondents were home makers and 46% worked as daily wage agricultural labourers.

### Aspirations related to Education and career of girls :

**Importance of education:** More than half of the girls were appreciative of getting education as it made them more aware about various issues and events that are important to

understand day to day life. Also, they strongly felt that education makes one self-sufficient and self-reliant. Others exclaimed that education boosts up confidence and gives financial independence.

***Ambitions after completing schooling:*** Though girls had restricted mobility and were not allowed to go outside their village for studies, they had high educational aspirations of pursuing further studies i.e. graduation or any vocational course. 50% of the girls wanted to take up a job soon after schooling in order to help their families overcome the financial crisis. Only 10% of them mentioned of getting married soon after school which might be due to the familial influences.

Local Panchayat also seems to play an active role in promoting education among girls as they proposed to start bus services from the village to the nearest city from the upcoming session i.e. 2015-16.

***Career aspirations:*** The young girls interviewed for the study aspired to make careers for themselves in various fields. Out of 30 girls, 11 aspired for “safer jobs” like teaching in school while only 2 thought of becoming professors. Nursing/ Practising as Doctor was second most opted career choice for the girls (n=10). Only 10% aspired for practicing law and becoming an advocate. For the careers as army officer, IPS officer or a journalist, girls said “*Ye sab jobs to ladko ke liye thik hain, humare liye to teaching job hi acchi hai*” (jobs like IPS officer, Army officer etc, are good for boys only, for girls teaching job is the best). It indicates that the gender roles imbibed from childhood can affect the career choices of the girls.

***Employment and their reasons:*** Majority of the girls wanted to have a government job and said “*sarkari naukri sabse acchi hai kyuki uske liye koi mana bhi nahi karta or timings bhi thik thik hoti hai to kisi ko shikayat bhi nahi rehti*” (a government job is best suited for girls as no one refuses to opt for it and because of its work timings, no body complains). None of the girls were interested in jobs related to communication technology like computer science, IT etc which might be due to lack of exposure and awareness about the work related aspects in that particular field. Reputation and self identity was a significant factor of being employed for 75% of the girls. Around 17% of the girls wanted to pursue a job for money while others wanted to make use of their acquired skills.

***Views regarding economic independence:*** More than 83% of the girls desired to become economically independent and work after marriage as well so that they don't have to ask for money from others and associated it with a sense of self-sufficiency and self-reliance. Others felt that economic independence may give them a sense of respect and recognition in the society.

It clearly illustrates that even though these girls belonged to a conservative environment but still they aspired to make their lives better which signifies a positive and gradual change in their lives.

### **Educational and career aspirations of the mothers towards girls :**

***Importance of education:*** For 37% of the respondents, education was important to increase the knowledge and awareness so that conscious decisions could be made in life. 30% of the mothers remarked that the desire to educate daughters is also motivated by the

desire to improve the daughter's own employment prospects and to assure the job security in future. 16% of them said that it plays a critical role in making an individual self-dependent. It is also associated with financial independence, as exclaimed by 10% of the total mothers interviewed. Others said that education also boosts self-confidence and enhances the overall personality of an individual. Therefore, it can be said that mothers as parents understand the importance of education.

***Aspirations after schooling:*** Maximum mothers (43.33%) wanted their daughters to pursue graduation after school while around 33% mothers desired their daughters to complete schooling only. Nearly one-fourth of the participants (23%) specified that they would try to fulfil their daughters' aspirations to the best of their capabilities. The findings point towards the changing perceptions of parents towards education in a positive way, ultimately leading to the better status of women in our society.

***Career aspirations of mothers for their daughters:*** Nearly half of the mothers (47%) motivated their daughters to pursue higher studies; graduation and post graduation. About one-fourth of the participants (23%) wanted their daughters to choose such a career wherein they can secure a good government job for themselves. Others had left it to the choice and destiny of the child. The findings are reflective of the fact that parents are opening up towards educating girls and making them self dependent.

***Employment and their reasons:*** Many of the mothers interviewed saw access to paid work as a means by which their daughters could avoid the degree of economic dependence that they themselves had been forced to accept. They wanted their daughters to opt for nursing (30%) and teaching (23%) as a profession in future. Nearly 23% of parents wanted their daughters to be settled with a government job whereas only 10% of them wanted them to explore new fields such as journalism, hospitality, etc. and become successful by following their aspirations. While the majority of mothers wanted their daughters to work in future and encouraged them as well to follow the aspirations, some (13%) specified that they would not allow their daughters to work and earn. Thus, it can be presumed that work preferences of parents for their daughters remained largely restrictive to those jobs that were socially approved for women; reflecting gender segregation in employment aspects.

***Permit mobility for educational and career aspects:*** When parents were asked about the movement of girls out of the village for pursuing higher studies or for employment, all of them refused straight pertaining to safety issues of young girls.

***Awareness about the daughters' future aspirations:*** All the mothers were very well aware of their daughters' future aspirations and mentioned that if their daughters put in their best efforts, then they would completely support them in that endeavour, except for one. She was a mother of five children, all daughters and wanted them to get married soon after completing schooling.

Perceptions of mothers towards girls: *The weakening of daughter devaluation*

The persistence of son preference among many of our respondents, as our quantitative data showed, co-existed with a weakening in the preference for sons among many others along with a revaluation of daughters. Particularly, the older ones believed that son preference had remained the norm, but there were others who were more attuned to the fact that change was taking place. As one of the mothers named Sneha (38 years) said: '*bahut logo*

*se suna hai ki wo ab ladkiyan prefer karte hai... pehle to ladki hote hi logo ke muh latak jate the... meri bua ne khud ki beti ko gala ghotkemaarne ki koshish kari thi...par bhagwan ne agar uski saas likhke bheji hai tow kaun hi rok sakta hai.... Meri bua to ladko se khush thi kyunki wo baadme kamake laate hai.... Par hum esa nahi sochte.... Mujhe to betiyan hi achi lagti hai...'* (I hear from a lot of people now that they prefer daughters. Earlier their faces would fall if they had a daughter... My aunt had a daughter – she tried to smother her with her hand, but if God decides to make her breathe, who can stop Him? They were happy with sons because they would be able to bring their earnings home. We don't feel like that anymore... now I think daughters are better).

### **Conclusion:**

Almost all the girls had high educational and future aspirations and they mentioned that they wanted to make their lives better but socialization and defined gender roles restrict their awareness and exposure to the outside world. Also, they remain subjugated due to functioning within limited space of physical mobility and the stereotypical expectations of society from them inhibit them to realize their true potential. This is further underpinned by an attitude that a girl in the natal home is considered as a temporary member and in husband's home an outsider.

As far as parental aspirations are concerned, they want their children to accomplish their goals and provide them full support. Majority of the mothers believed that there had been a change related to women's value in society reflected through changes in female education, increased opportunities for work for girls and a public discourse about rights but societal norms, gender roles and responsibilities impinge on the girls' aspirations.

There is a need for the state to bring about policies and programmes that focus on the personhood of girlswith forward linkages to employment and skill-building. If there will be an emphasis on economic self-reliance, equal right to dignity and self-expression of girls and marriage is made peripheral to their existence, a lot can change.

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